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THE NEW ABELARD

A Romance

BY

ROBERT BUCHANAN

AUTHOR OF 'THE SHADOW OF THE SWORD' 'GOD AND THE MAN' ETC



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CONTENTS

OF

THE THIRD VOLUME.

| CHAPTER | PAGE |
|--------------------------------------|------|
| XXII. FROM THE POST-BAG | 1 |
| XXIII. ALMA'S WANDERINGS | 11 |
| XXIV. GLIMPSES OF THE UNSEEN | 32 |
| XXV. A CATASTROPHE | 57 |
| XXVI. THE LAST LOOK | 78 |
| XXVII. THE SIREN | 95 |
| XXVIII. THE ETERNAL CITY | 129 |
| XXIX. THE NAMELESS GRAVE | 154 |
| XXX. IN PARIS | 164 |
| XXXI. AMONG THE MOUNTAINS | 190 |
| XXXII. ANOTHER OLD LETTER | 203 |

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THE NEW ABELARD.

CHAPTER XXII.

FROM THE POST-BAG.

I.

Sir George Craik, Bart., to Alma Craik.

MY DEAR NIECE,—The receipt of your letter, dated ‘Lucerne,’ but bearing the post-mark of Geneva, has at last relieved my mind from the weight of anxiety which was oppressing it. Thank Heaven you are safe and well, and bear your suffering with Christian resignation. In a little time, I trust, you will have left this dark passage of your experience quite behind

you, and return to us looking and feeling like your old self. George, who now, as always, shares my affectionate solicitude for you, joins me in expressing that wish. The poor boy is still sadly troubled at the remembrance of your misconception, and I sometimes think that his health is affected. Do, if you can, try to send him a line or a message, assuring him that your unhappy misunderstanding is over. Believe me, his one thought in life is to secure your good esteem.

There is no news—none, that is to say, of any importance. We have kept our promise to you, and your secret is still quite safe in our custody. The man to whom you owe all this misery is still here, and still, I am informed, prostituting the pulpit to his vicious heresies. If report is to be believed, his utterances have

of late been more extraordinary than ever, and he is rapidly losing influence over his own congregation. Sometimes I can scarcely conquer my indignation, knowing as I do that with one word I could effectually silence his blasphemy, and drive him beyond the pale of society. But in crushing him I should disgrace you, and bring contempt upon our name; and these considerations, as well as my pledge to keep silence, make any kind of public action impossible. I must therefore wait patiently till the inevitable course of events, accelerated by an indignant Providence, destroys the destroyer of your peace.

In the mean time, my dear Alma, let me express my concern and regret that you should be wandering from place to place without a protector. I know your strength of mind, of

course ; but you are young and handsome, and the world is censorious. Only say the word, and although business of a rather important nature occupies me in London, I will put it aside at any cost, and join you. In the absence of my dear brother, I am your natural guardian. While legally your own mistress, you are morally under my care, and I would make any sacrifice to be with you, especially at this critical moment of your life.

I send this letter to the address you have given me at Lucerne. I hope it will reach you soon and safely, and that you will, on seeing it, fall in with my suggestion that I should come to you without delay.

With warmest love and sympathy, in which your cousin joins, believe me as ever,—Your affectionate uncle,

GEORGE CRAIK.

II.

From Alma Craik to Sir George Craik, Bart.

MY DEAR UNCLE,—I have just received your letter. Thank you for attending to my request. With regard to your suggestion that you should come to me, I know it is meant in all kindness, but as I told you before leaving London, I prefer at present to be quite alone, with the exception of my maid Hortense. I will let you know of my movements from time to time,—Your affectionate niece,

ALMA CRAIK.

III.

Alma Craik to the Rev. Ambrose Bradley.

Your letter, together with one from my uncle, found me at Lucerne, and brought me to once grief and comfort : grief, that you still

reproach yourself over what was inevitable ; comfort, that you are, as you assure me, still endeavouring to pursue your religious work. Pray, pray, do not write to me in such a strain again. You have neither wrecked my life nor broken my heart, as you blame yourself for doing ; I learned long ago from our Divine Example that the world is one of sorrow, and I am realising the truth in my own experience, that is all.

You ask me how and where I have spent my days, and whether I have at present any fixed destination. I have been wandering, so to speak, among the gravestones of the Catholic Church, visiting not only the great shrines and cathedrals, but lingering in every obscure roadside chapel, and halting at every Calvary, in southern and western France. Thence I

have come on to Switzerland, where religion grows drearier, and life grows dimmer, in the shadow of the mountains. In a few days I shall follow in your own footsteps, and go on to Italy—to Rome.

Write to me when you feel impelled to write. You shall be apprised of my whereabouts from time to time.—Yours now as ever,

ALMA.

P.S.—When I sat down to write the above, I thought I had so much to say to you; and I have said nothing! Something numbs expression, though my thoughts seem full to overflowing. I am like one who longs to speak, yet fears to utter a syllable, lest her voice should be clothed with tears and sobs. God help me! All the world is changed, and I can hardly realise it, yet!

IV.

Ambrose Bradley to Alma Craik.

DEAREST ALMA,—You tell me in your letter that you have said nothing of the thoughts that struggle within you for utterance ; alas ! your words are only too eloquent, less in what they say than in what they leave unsaid. If I required any reminder of the mischief I have wrought, of the beautiful dream that I have destroyed, it would come to me in the pathetic reticence of the letter I have just received. Would to God that you had never known me ! Would to God that, having known me, you would have despised me as I deserved ! I was unworthy even to touch the hem of your garment. I am like a wretch

who has profaned the altar of a saint. Your patience and devotion are an eternal rebuke. I could bear your bitter blame ; I cannot bear your forgiveness.

I am here as you left me ; a guilty, conscience-stricken creature struggling in a world of nightmares. Nothing now seems substantial, permanent, or true. Every time that I stand up before my congregation I am like a shadow addressing shadows ; thought and language both fail me, and I know not what platitudes flow from my lips ; but when I am left alone again, I awaken as from a dream to the horrible reality of my guilt and my despair.

I have thought it all over again and again, trying to discover some course by which I might bring succour to myself and peace to

her I love ; and whichever way I look, I see but one path of escape, the rayless descent of death. For, so long as I live, I darken your sunshine. My very existence is a reminder to you of what I am, of what I might have been.

But there, I will not pain you with my penitence, and I will hush my self-reproaches in deference to your desire. Though the staff you placed in my hand has become a reed, and though I seem to have no longer any foothold on the solid ground of life, I will try to struggle on.

I dare not ask you to write to me—it seems an outrage to beg for such a blessing ; yet I know that you *will* pity me, and write again.—Ever yours,

AMBROSE BRADLEY.

CHAPTER XXIII.

ALMA'S WANDERINGS.

Scoff not at Rome, or if thou scoff beware
 Her vengeance waiting in the heaven and air ;
 Her love is blessing, and her hate, despair.

Yet see ! how low the hoary mother lies,
 Prone on her face beneath the lonely skies—
 On her head ashes, dust upon her eyes.

Men smile and pass, but many pitying stand,
 And some stoop down to kiss her withered hand,
 Whose sceptre is a reed, whose crown is sand.

Think'st thou no pulse beats in that bounteous breast
 Which once sent throbs of rapture east and west ?
 Nay, but she liveth, mighty tho' opprest.

Her arm could reach as low as hell, as high
 As the white mountains and the starry sky ;
 She filled the empty heavens with her cry.

Wait but a space, and watch—her trance of pain
 Shall dry away—her tears shall cease as rain—
 Queen of the nations, she shall smile again !

THE LADDER OF ST. AUGUSTINE.

BRADLEY'S letter was forwarded from Lucerne

after some little delay, and reached Miss Craik at Brieg, just as she was preparing to proceed by private conveyance to Domo d'Ossola. She had taken the carriage and pair for herself and her maid, a young Frenchwoman; and as the vehicle rounded its zigzag course towards the Klenenhorn, she perused the epistle line by line, until she had learned almost every word by heart.

Then, with the letter lying in her lap, she gazed sadly, almost vacantly, around her on the gloomy forests and distant hills, the precipices spanned by aerial bridges, the quaint villages clinging like birds'-nests here and there, the dark vistas of mountain side gashed by torrents frozen by distance to dazzling white.

Dreary beyond measure, though the skies

were blue and the air full of golden sunlight, seemed the wonderful scene :—

We make the world we look on, and create
The summer or the winter with our seeing!

And cold and wintry indeed was all that Alma beheld that summer day.

Not even the glorious panorama unfolded beneath her gaze on passing the Second Refuge had any charms to please her saddened sight. Leaving the lovely valley of the Rhone, sparkling in sunlight, encircled by the snow-crowned Alps, with the Jungfrau towering paramount, crowned with glittering icy splendour and resting against a heaven of deep insufferable blue, she passed through avenues of larch and fir, over dizzy bridges, past the lovely glacier of the Kaltwasser, till she reached the high ascent of the Fifth Refuge.

Here the coarse spirit of the age arose before her, in the shape of a party of English and American tourists crowding the diligence and descending noisily for refreshment.

A little later she passed the barrier toll, and came in sight of the Cross of 'Vantage. She arrested the carriage, and descended for a few minutes, standing as it were suspended in mid air, in full view of glacier upon glacier, closed in by the mighty chain of the Bernese Alps.

Never had she felt so utterly solitary. The beautiful world, the empty sky, swam before her in all the loveliness of desolation, and turning her face towards Aletsch, she wept bitterly.

As she stood thus, she was suddenly conscious of another figure standing near to her, as if in rapt contemplation of the solemn

scene. It was that of a middle-aged man, rather above the middle stature, who carried a small knapsack on his shoulders and leant upon an Alpine staff. She saw only his side face, and his eyes were turned away; yet, curiously enough, his form had an air of listening watchfulness, and the moment she was conscious of his presence he turned and smiled, and raised his hat. She noticed then that his sunburnt face was clean shaven, like that of a priest, and that his eyes were black and piercing, though remarkably good-humoured.

‘Pardon, Madame,’ he said in French, ‘but I think we have met before.’

She had turned away her head to hide her tears from the stranger’s gaze. Without waiting for her answer, he proceeded.

‘In the hotel at Brieg. I was staying there when Madame arrived, and I left at day-break this morning to cross the Pass on foot.’

By this time she had mastered her agitation, and could regard the stranger with a certain self-possession. His face, though not handsome, was mobile and expressive ; the eyebrows were black and prominent, the forehead was high, the mouth large and well cut, with glittering white teeth. It was difficult to tell the man’s age ; for though his countenance was so fresh that it looked quite young, his forehead and cheeks, in repose, showed strongly-marked lines ; and though his form seemed strong and agile, he stooped greatly at the shoulders. To complete the contradiction, his hair was as white as snow.

What mark is it that Rome puts upon her

servants, that we seem to know them under almost any habit or disguise? One glance convinced Alma that the stranger either belonged to some of the holy orders, or was a lay priest of the Romish Church.

‘I do not remember to have seen you before, Monsieur,’ she replied, also in French, with a certain hauteur.

The stranger smiled again, and bowed apologetically.

‘Perhaps I was wrong to address Madame without a more formal introduction. I know that in England it is not the custom. But here on the mountain, far away from the conventions of the world, it would be strange, would it not, to meet in silence? We are like two souls that encounter on pilgrimage, both looking wearily towards the Celestial Gate.’

‘Are you a priest, Monsieur?’ asked Alma abruptly.

The stranger bowed again.

‘A poor member of the Church, the Abbé Brest. I am journeying on foot through the Simplon to the Lago Maggiore, and thence, with God’s blessing, to Milan. But I shall rest yonder, at the New Hospice, to-night.’

And he pointed across the mountain towards the refuge of the monks of St. Bernard, close to the region of perpetual snow. The tall figure of an Augustine monk, shading his eyes and looking up the road was visible; and from the refectory within came the faint tolling of a bell mingled from time to time with the deep barking of a dog.

‘The monks receive travellers still?’ asked Alma. ‘I suppose the Hospice is rapidly be-

coming, like its compeers, nothing more or less than a big hotel ? ’

‘ Madame——’

‘ Please do not call me Madame. I am unmarried.’

She spoke almost without reflection, and it was not until she had uttered the words that their significance dawned upon her. Her face became crimson with sudden shame.

It was characteristic of the stranger that he noticed the change in a moment, but that, immediately on doing so, he turned away his eyes and seemed deeply interested in the distant prospect, while he replied :—

‘ I have again to ask your pardon for my stupidity. Mademoiselle, of course, is English ? ’

‘ Yes.’

‘ And is therefore, perhaps, a little pre-

judiced against those who, like the good monks of the Hospice, shut themselves from all human companionship, save that of the wayfarers whom they live to save and shelter? Yet, believe me, it is a life of sacred service! Even here, among the lonely snows, reaches the arm of the Holy Mother, to plant this cross by the wayside, as a symbol of her heavenly inspiration, and to build that holy resting-place as a haven for those who are weary and would rest.'

He spoke with the same soft insinuating smile as before, but his eye kindled, and his pale face flushed with enthusiasm. Alma, who had turned towards the carriage which stood awaiting her, looked at him with new interest. Something in his words chimed in with a secret longing of her heart.

'I have been taught to believe, Monsieur,

that your faith is practically dead. Everywhere we see, instead of its living temples, only the ruins of its old power. If its spirit exists still, it is only in places such as this, in company with loneliness and death.'

'Ah, but Mademoiselle is mistaken!' returned the other, following by her side as she walked slowly towards the carriage. 'Had you seen what I have seen, if you knew what I know, of the great Catholic reaction, you would think differently. Other creeds, gloomier and more ambitious, have displaced ours for a time in your England; but let me ask you—you, Mademoiselle, who have a truly religious spirit—you who have yourself suffered—what have those other creeds done for humanity? Believe me, little or nothing. In times of despair and doubt, the world will again turn to its first

Comforter, the ever-patient and ever-loving Church of Christ.'

They had by this time reached the carriage door. The stranger bowed again and assisted Alma to her seat. Then he raised his hat with profound respect in sign of farewell. The coachman was about to drive on when Alma signed for him to delay.

'I am on my way to Domo d'Ossola,' she said. 'A seat in my carriage is at your service if you would prefer going on to remaining at the Hospice for the night.'

'Mademoiselle, it is too much! I could not think of obtruding myself upon you! I, a stranger!'

Yet he seemed to look longingly at the comfortable seat in the vehicle, and to require little more pressing to accept the offer.

‘Pray do not hesitate,’ said Alma, smiling, ‘unless you prefer the company of the monks of the mountain.’

‘After that, I can hesitate no longer,’ returned the Abbé, looking radiant with delight ; and he forthwith entered the vehicle and placed himself by Alma’s side.

Thus it came to pass that my heroine descended the Pass of the Simplon in company with her new acquaintance, an avowed member of a Church for which she had felt very little sympathy until that hour. To do him justice, I must record the fact that she found him a most interesting companion. His knowledge of the world was extensive, his learning little short of profound, his manners were charming. He knew every inch of the way, and pointed out the objects of interest, digressing lightly

into the topics they awakened. At every turn the prospect brightened. Leaving the wild and barren slopes behind them, the travellers passed through emerald pasturages, and through reaches of foliage broken by sounding torrents, and at last emerging from the great valley, and crossing the bridge of Crevola, they found themselves surrounded on every side by vineyards, orchards, and green meadows. When the carriage drew up before the door of the hotel at Domo d'Ossola, Alma felt that the time had passed as if under enchantment. Although she had spoken very little, she had quite unconsciously informed her new friend of three facts—that she was a wealthy young Englishwoman travelling through Europe at her own free will ; that she had undergone an unhappy experience, involv-

ing, doubtless, some person of the opposite sex ; and that, in despair of comfort from creeds colder and less forgiving, she was just in a fit state of mind to seek refuge in the bosom of the Church of Rome.

The acquaintance, begun so curiously in the Simplon Pass, was destined to continue. At Domo d'Ossola, Alma parted from the Abbé Brest, whose destination was some obscure village on the banks of Lago Maggiore ; but a few weeks later, when staying at Milan, she encountered him again. She had ascended the tower of the Duomo, and was gazing down on the streets and marts of the beautiful city, when she heard a voice behind her murmuring her name, and turning somewhat nervously, she encountered the bright black eyes of the wandering Abbé.

He accosted her with his characteristic *bonhomie*.

‘Ah, Mademoiselle, it *is* you!’ he cried smiling. ‘We are destined to meet in the high places—here on the tower of the cathedral, there on the heights of the Simplon!’

There was something so unexpected, so mysterious in the man’s reappearance, that Alma was startled in spite of herself, but she greeted him courteously, and they descended the tower steps together. The Abbé kept a solemn silence as they walked through the sacred building, with its mighty walls of white marble, its gorgeous decorations, its antique tombs, its works in bronze and in mosaic; but when they passed from the porch into the open sunlight, he became as garrulous as ever.

They walked along together in the direction of the Grand Hotel, where Alma was staying.

‘Have you driven out to the cathedral at Monza?’ inquired the Abbé in the course of their conversation.

‘No ; is it worth seeing?’

‘Certainly. Besides, it contains the sacred crown of Lombardy, the iron band of which is made out of nails from the true cross.’

‘Indeed!’ exclaimed Alma with a smile that was incredulous, even contemptuous. She glanced at her companion, and saw that he was smiling too.

It was not until she had been some weeks away from England that Alma Craik quite realised her position in the world. In the first wild excitement of her flight her only

feeling was one of bewildered agitation, mingled with a mad impulse to return upon her own footsteps, and, reckless of the world's opinion, take her place by Bradley's side. A word of encouragement from him at that period would have decided her fate. But after the first pang of grief was over, after she was capable of regretful retrospection, her spirit became numbed with utter despair. She found herself solitary, friendless, hopeless, afflicted with an incurable moral disease to which she was unable to give a name, but which made her long, like the old anchorites and penitents, to seek some desert place and yield her life to God.

In this mood of mind she turned for solace to religion, and found how useless for all practical purposes was her creed of beautiful ideas.

Her faith in Christian facts had been shaken if not destroyed ; the Christian myth had the vagueness and strangeness of a dream ; yet, true to her old instincts, she haunted the temples of the Church, and felt like one wandering through a great graveyard of the dead.

Travelling quite alone, for her maid was in no sense of the words a confidante or a companion, she could not fail to awaken curious interest in many with whom she was thrown into passing contact. Her extraordinary personal beauty was heightened rather than obscured by her singularity of dress ; for though she wore no wedding-ring, she dressed in black like a widow, and had the manners as well as the attire of a person profoundly mourning. At the hotels she invariably engaged private apartments, seldom or never descending to the

public rooms; or joining in the tables-d'hôte. The general impression concerning her was that she was an eccentric young Englishwoman of great wealth, recently bereaved of some person very near and dear to her, possibly her husband.

Thus she lived in seclusion, resisting all friendly advances, whether on the part of foreigners or of her own countrymen; and her acquaintance with the Abbé Brest would never have passed beyond a few casual courtesies had it not begun under circumstances so peculiar and in a place so solitary, or had the man himself been anything but a member of the mysterious Mother Church. But the woman's spirit was pining for some kind of guidance, and the magnetic name of Rome had already awakened in it a melancholy

fascination. The strange priest attracted her, firstly, by his eloquent personality, secondly, by the authority he seemed to derive from a power still pretending to achieve miracles: and though in her heart she despised the pretensions and loathed the dogmas of his Church, she felt in his presence the sympathy of a prescient mind. For the rest, any companionship, if intellectual, was better than utter social isolation.

So the meeting on the tower of the Duomo led to other meetings. The Abbé became her constant companion, and her guide through all the many temples of the queenly city.

CHAPTER XXIV.

GLIMPSES OF THE UNSEEN.

The earth has bubbles as the water hath,
And these are of them!—*Macbeth*.

WHILE the woman he had so cruelly deceived and wronged was wandering from city to city, and trying in vain to find rest and consolation, Ambrose Bradley remained at the post where she had left him, the most melancholy soul beneath the sun. All his happiness in his work being gone, his ministration lost the fervour and originality that had at first been its dominant attraction.

Sir George had not exaggerated when he

said that the clergyman's flock was rapidly falling away from him. New lights were arising; new religious whims and oddities were attracting the restless spirits of the metropolis. A thought-reading charlatan from the New World, a learned physiologist proving the oneness of the sympathetic system with polarised light, a maniacal non-jurist asserting the prerogative of affirmation at the bar of the House of Commons, became each a nine-days' wonder. The utterances of the new gospel were forgotten, or disregarded as flatulent and unprofitable; and Ambrose Bradley found his occupation gone.

For all this he cared little or nothing. He was too lost in contemplation of his own moral misery. All his thought and prayer being to escape from this, he tried various distractions—

the theatre, for example, with its provincial theory of edification grafted on the dry stem of what had once been a tree of literature. He was utterly objectless and miserable, when, one morning, he received the following letter:—

‘ Monmouth Crescent, Bayswater.

‘ MY DEAR SIR,—Will you permit me to remind you, by means of this letter, of the notes of introduction presented recently by me to you, and written by our friends, —— and ——, in America? My sister gives a *séance* to-morrow evening, and several notabilities of the scientific and literary world have promised to be present. If you will honour us with your company, I think you will be able to form a disinterested opinion on the importance of the new biology, as manifestations of an extraordinary kind are confidently expected.

—With kind regards, in which my sister joins,
I am, most faithfully yours,

‘SALEM MAPLELEAFE,
‘*Solar Biologist.*’

‘P.S.—The *séance* commences at five o’clock, in this domicile.’

Bradley’s first impulse was to throw the letter aside, and to write a curt but polite refusal. On reflection, however, he saw in the proposed *séance* a means of temporary distraction. Besides, the affair of the mysterious photograph had left him not a little curious as to the machinery used by the brother and sister—*arcades ambo*, or impostors both, he was certain—to gull an undiscerning public.

At a little before five on the following evening, therefore, he presented himself at

the door of the house in Monmouth Crescent, sent up his card, and was almost immediately shown into the drawing-room. To his surprise he found no one there, but he had scarcely glanced round the apartment when the door opened, and a slight sylph-like figure, clad in white, appeared before him.

At a glance he recognised the face he had seen on the fading photograph.

‘How do you do, Mr. Bradley?’ said Eustasia, holding out a thin transparent hand, and fixing her light eyes upon his face.

‘I received your brother’s invitation,’ he replied rather awkwardly. ‘I am afraid I am a little before my time.’

‘Well, you’re the first to arrive. Salem’s upstairs washing, and will be down directly. He’s real pleased to know you’ve come.’

She flitted lightly across the room, and sat down close to the window. She looked white and worn, and all the life of her frame seemed concentrated in her extraordinary eyes, which she fixed upon the visitor with a steadiness calculated to discompose a timid man.

‘Won’t you sit down, Mr. Bradley?’ she said, repeating the name with a curious familiarity.

‘You seem to know me well,’ he replied, seating himself, ‘though I do not think we have ever met.’

‘Oh, yes, we have; leastways, I’ve often heard you preach. I knew a man once in the States, who was the very image of *you*. He’s dead now, he is.’

Her voice, with its strong foreign inflexion, rang so strangely and plaintively on the last

words, that Bradley was startled. He looked at the girl more closely, and was struck by her unearthly beauty, contrasting so oddly with her matter-of-fact, offhand manner.

‘Your brother tells me that you are a sibyl,’ he said, drawing his chair nearer. ‘I am afraid, Miss Mapleleaf, you will find me a disturbing influence. I have about as much faith in solar biology, spiritualism, spirit-agency, or whatever you like to call it, as I have in—well, Mumbo-Jumbo.’

Her eyes still looked brightly into his, and her wan face was lit up with a curious smile.

‘That’s what they all say at first! Guess you think, then, that I’m an impostor? Don’t be afraid to speak your mind; I’m used to it; I’ve had worse than hard names thrown at

me; stones and all that. I was stabbed once down South, and I've the mark still !'

As she spoke, she bared her white arm to the elbow, and showed, just in the fleshy part of the arm, the mark of an old scar.

'The man that did that drew his knife in the dark, and pinioned my arm to the table. The very man that was like *you*.'

And lifting her arm to her lips she kissed the scar, and murmured, or crooned, to herself as she had done on the former occasion in the presence of her brother. Bradley looked on in amazement. So far as he could perceive at present, the woman was a half-mad creature, scarcely responsible for what she said or did.

His embarrassment was not lessened when Eustasia, still holding the arm to her lips,

looked at him through thickly gathering tears, and then, as if starting from a trance, gave vent to a wild yet musical laugh.

Scarcely knowing what to say, he continued the former topic of conversation.

‘I presume you are what is called a clairvoyante. That, of course, I can understand. But, do you really believe in supernatural manifestations?’

Here the voice of the little Professor, who had quietly entered the room, supplied an answer.

‘Certainly not, sir. The office of solar biology is not to vindicate, but to destroy, supernaturalism. *You* mean superhuman, which is quite another thing.

‘All things abide in Nature, nought subsists
Beyond the infinite celestial scheme.
Motes in the sunbeam are the lives of men,

But in the moonlight and the stellar ray,
In every burning flame of every sphere,
Exist intelligible agencies
Akin to thine and mine.

That's how the great Bard puts it in a nutshell. Other lives in other worlds, sir, but no life out or beyond Nature, which embraces the solid universe to the remotest point in space.'

Concluding with this flourish, Professor Mapleleaf dropped down into commonplace, wrung the visitor's hand, and wished him a very good-day.

'How do you feel, Eustasia?' he continued with some anxiety, addressing his sister. 'Do you feel as if the atmosphere this afternoon was properly conditioned?'

'Yes, Salem, I think so.'

The Professor looked at his watch, and simultaneously there came a loud rapping at

the door. Presently three persons entered, a tall, powerful-looking man, who was introduced as Doctor Kendall, and two elderly gentlemen; then a minute later, a little gray-haired man, the well-known Sir James Beaton, a famous physician of Edinburgh. The party was completed by the landlady of the house, who came up dressed in black silk, and wearing a widow's cap.

‘Now, then, ladies and gentlemen,’ said the little Professor glibly, ‘we shall, with your permission, begin in the usual manner, by darkening the chamber and forming an ordinary circle. I warn you, however, that this is trivial, and in the manner of professional mediums. As the séance advances and the power deepens, we shall doubtless be lifted to higher ground.’

So saying he drew the heavy curtains of the

window, leaving the room in semi-darkness. Then the party sat down around a small circular table, and touched hands ; Bradley sitting opposite Eustasia, who had Dr. Kendall on her right and Sir James Beaton on her left. The usual manifestations followed. The table rose bodily into the air, bells were rung, tiny sparkles of light flashed about the room.

This lasted about a quarter of an hour, at the end of which time Mapleleaf broke the circle, and drawing back a curtain, admitted some light into the room. It was then discovered that Eustasia, sitting in her place, with her hands resting upon the table, was in a state of mesmeric trance ; and ghastly and sibylline indeed she looked, with her great eyes wide open, her golden hair fallen on her shoulders, her face shining as if mysteriously anointed.]

‘Eustasia!’ said the Professor softly.

The girl remained motionless, and did not seem to hear.

‘Eustasia!’ he repeated.

This time her lips moved, and a voice, that seemed shriller and clearer than her own, replied :—

‘Eustasia is not here. I am Sira.’

‘Who is Sira?’

‘A spirit of the third magnitude, from the region of the moon.’

A titter ran round the company, and Sir James Beaton essayed a feeble joke.

‘A lunar spirit—we shall not, I hope, be *de lunatico inquirendo*.’

‘Hush, sir!’ cried the Professor; then he continued, addressing the medium his sister,

‘ Let me know if the conditions are perfect or imperfect ? ’

‘ I cannot tell,’ was the reply.

‘ Do you see anything, Sira ? ’

‘ I see faint forms floating on the sunbeam. They come and go, they change and fade. One is like a child, with its hand full of flowers. They are lilies—O, I can see no more. I am blind. There is too much light.’

The Professor drew the curtain, darkening the chamber. He then sat down in his place at the table, and requested all present to touch hands once more. So far, Bradley had looked on with impatience, not unmingled with disgust. What he saw and heard was exactly what he had heard described a hundred times.

With the darkening of the room, the mani-

festations recommenced. The table moved about like a thing possessed, the very floor seemed to tremble and upheave, the bells rang, the lights flashed.

Then all at once Bradley became aware of a strange sound, as if the whole room were full of life.

‘Keep still!’ said the Professor. ‘Do not break the chain. Wait!’

A long silence followed; then the strange sound was heard again.

‘Are you there, my friend?’ asked the Professor.

There was no reply.

‘Are the conditions right?’

He was answered by a cry from the medium, so wild and strange that all present were startled and awed.

‘ See ! see ! ’

‘ What is it, Sira ? ’ demanded the Professor.

‘ Shapes like angels, carrying one that looks like a corpse. They are singing—do you not hear them ? Now they are touching me—they are passing their hands over my hair. I see my mother ; she is weeping and bending over me. Mother ! mother ! ’

Simultaneously, Bradley himself appeared conscious of glimpses like human faces flashing and fading. In spite of his scepticism, a deep dread, which was shared more or less by all present, fell upon him. Then all at once he became aware of something like a living form, clad in robes of dazzling whiteness, passing by him. An icy cold hand was pressed to his forehead, leaving a clammy damp like dew.

‘I see a shape of some kind,’ he cried.

‘Does anyone else perceive it?’

‘Yes! yes! yes!’ came from several voices.

‘It is the spirit of a woman,’ murmured the medium.

‘Do you know her?’ added the Professor.

‘No; she belongs to the living world, not to the dead. I see far away, somewhere on this planet, a beautiful lady lying asleep; she seems full of sorrow, her pillow is wet with tears. This is the lady’s spirit, brought hither by the magnetic influence of one she loves.’

‘Can you describe her to us more closely?’

‘Yes. She has dark hair, and splendid dark eyes; she is tall and lovely. The lady and the spirit are alike, the counterpart of each other.’

Once more Bradley was conscious of the white form standing near him ; he reached out his hands to touch it, but it immediately vanished.

At the same moment he felt a touch like breath upon his face, and heard a soft musical voice murmuring in his ear—

‘ Ambrose ! beloved ! ’

He started in wonder, for the voice seemed that of Alma Craik.

‘ Be good enough not to break the chain ! ’ said the landlady, who occupied the chair at his side.

Trembling violently, he returned his hands to their place, touching those of his immediate neighbours on either side. The instant he did so, he heard the voice again, and felt the touch like breath.

‘Ambrose, do you know me?’

‘Who is speaking?’ he demanded.

A hand soft as velvet and cold as ice was passed over his hair.

‘It is I, dearest!’ said the voice. ‘It is *Alma!*’

‘What brings you here?’ he murmured, almost inaudibly.

‘I knew you were in sorrow;—I came to bring you comfort, and to assure you of my affection.’

The words were spoken in a low, just audible voice, close to his ear, and it is doubtful if they were heard by any other member of the company. In the meantime the more commonplace manifestations still continued; the room was full of strange sounds, bells ringing, knocking, shuffling of invisible feet.

Bradley was startled beyond measure. Either her supernatural presence was close by him, or he was the victim of some cruel trick. Before he could speak again, he felt the pressure of cold lips on his forehead, and the same strange voice murmuring farewell.

Wild with excitement, not unmingled with suspicion, he again broke the chain and sprang to his feet. There was a sharp cry from the medium, as he sprang to the window and drew back the curtain, letting in the daylight. But the act discovered nothing. All the members of the circle, save himself, were sitting in their places. Eustasia, the medium, was calmly leaning back in her chair. In a moment, however, she started, put her hand quickly to her forehead as if in pain, and seemed to emerge from her trance.

‘Salem,’ she cried in her own natural voice, ‘has anything happened?’

‘Mr. Bradley has broken the conditions, that’s all,’ returned the Professor, with an air of offended dignity. ‘I do protest, ladies and gentlemen, against that interruption. It has brought a most interesting séance to a violent close.’

There was a general murmur from the company, and dissatisfied glances were cast at the offender.

‘I am very sorry,’ said the clergyman. ‘I yielded to an irresistible influence.’

‘The spirits won’t be trifled with, sir,’ cried Mapleleaf.

‘Certainly not,’ said one of the elderly gentlemen. ‘Solemn mysteries like these should be approached in a fair and a—hum—

a respectful spirit. For my own part, I am quite satisfied with what I have seen. It convinces me of—hum—the reality of these phenomena.’

The other elderly gentleman concurred. Dr. Kendall and Sir James, who had been comparing notes, said that they would reserve their final judgment until they had been present at another séance. In the mean time they would go so far as to say that what they had witnessed was very extraordinary indeed.

‘How are you now, Eustasia?’ said the Professor, addressing his sister.

‘My head aches. I feel as if I had been standing for hours in a burning sun. When you called me back I was dreaming so strangely. I thought I was in some celestial place, walking hand in hand with the Lord Jesus.’

Bradley looked at the speaker's face. It looked full of elfin or witch-like rather than angelic light. Their eyes met, and Eustasia gave a curious smile.

‘Will you come again, Mr. Bradley?’

‘I don't know. Perhaps; that is to say, if you will permit me.’

‘I do think, sir,’ interrupted the Professor, ‘that you have given offence to the celestial intelligences, and I am not inclined to admit you to our circle again.’

Several voices murmured approval.

‘You are wrong, brother,’ cried Eustasia, ‘you are quite wrong.’

‘What do you mean, Eustasia?’

‘I mean that Mr. Bradley is a medium himself, and a particular favourite with spirits of the first order.’

The Professor seemed to reflect.

‘Well, if that’s so (and *you* ought to know), it’s another matter. But he’ll have to promise not to break the conditions. It ain’t fair to the spirits; it ain’t fair to his fellow-inquirers.’

One by one the company departed, but Bradley still lingered, as if he had something still to hear or say. At last, when the last visitor had gone, and the landlady had grimly stalked away to continue her duties in the basement of the house, he found himself alone with the brother and sister.

He stood hesitating, hat in hand.

‘May I ask you a few questions?’ he said, addressing Eustasia.

‘Why, certainly,’ she replied.

‘While you were in the state of trance did

you see or hear anything that took place in this room ? ’

Eustasia shook her head.

‘ Do you know anything whatever of my private life ? ’

‘ I guess not, except what I’ve read in the papers.’

‘ Do you know a lady named Craik, who is one of the members of my congregation ? ’

The answer came in another shake of the head, and a blank look expressing entire ignorance. Either Eustasia knew nothing whatever, or she was a most accomplished actress. Puzzled and amazed, yet still suspecting fraud of some kind, Bradley took his leave.

CHAPTER XXV.

A CATASTROPHE.

‘ After life’s fitful fever, she sleeps well ! ’

THE few days following the one on which the spiritualistic *séance* was held were passed by Bradley in a sort of dream. The more he thought of what he had heard and seen, the more puzzled he became. At times he seemed half inclined to believe in supernatural collaboration, then he flouted his belief and laughed contemptuously at himself. Of course it was all imposture, and he had been a dupe.

Then he thought of Eustasia, and the

interest which she had at first aroused in him rapidly changed to indignation and contempt.

Very soon these people ceased to occupy his thoughts at all; so self-absorbed was he, indeed, in his own trouble that he forgot them as completely as if they had never been. After all they were but shadows which had flitted across his path and faded. Had he been left to himself he would assuredly never have summoned them up again.

But he was evidently too valuable a convert to be let go in that way. One morning he received the following note, written on delicate paper in the most fairylike of fragile hands:

‘MY DEAR MR. BRADLEY,—We hold a *séance* to-morrow night at six, and hope you’ll come; at least, *I* do! Salem don’t particularly

want you, since you broke the conditions, and he regards you as a disturbing influence. *I know better*: the spirits like you, and I feel that with you I could do great things; so I hope you'll be here.

‘EUSTASIA MAPLELEAFE.’

Bradley read the letter through twice, then he gazed at it for a time in trembling hesitation. Should he go? Why not? Suppose the people were humbugs, were they worse than dozens of others he had met? and they had at least the merit of bringing back to him the presence of the one being who was all in all to him. His hesitation lasted only for a moment—the repulsion came. He threw the letter aside.

A few days later a much more significant incident occurred. As Bradley was leaving

his house one morning he came face to face with a veiled woman who stood before his door. He was about to pass: the lady laid a retaining hand upon his arm and raised her veil.

It was Eustasia.

‘Guess you’re surprised to see me,’ she said, noticing his start; ‘suppose I may come in, though, now I’m here?’

Bradley pushed open the door, and led the way to his study. Eustasia followed him; having reached the room, she sat down and eyed him wistfully.

‘Did you get my letter?’ she asked.

‘Yes.’

‘You didn’t answer it?’

‘No.’

‘Why not?’

Bradley hesitated.

‘Do you want me to tell you?’ he said.

‘Why, certainly—else why do I ask you? but I see you don’t wish to tell me. Why?’

‘Because I dislike giving unnecessary pain.’

‘Ah! in other words you believe me to be a humbug, but you haven’t the cruelty to say so. Well, that don’t trouble me. *Prove* me to be one, and you may call me one, but give me a fair trial first.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Come to some more of our *séances*, will you? *do* say you’ll come!’

She laid her hand gently upon his arm, and fixed her eyes almost entreatingly upon him. He stared at her like one fascinated, then shrank before her glance.

‘Why do you wish me to come?’ he said. ‘You know my thoughts and feelings on this subject. You and I are cast in different moulds; we must go different ways.’

She smiled sadly.

‘The spirits will it otherwise,’ she said; while under her breath she added, ‘and so do I.’

But he was in no mood to yield that day. As soon as Eustasia saw this she rose to go. When her thin hand lay in his, she said softly:

‘Mr. Bradley, if ever you are in trouble come to *us*; you will find it is not all humbug *then!*’

Eustasia returned home full of hope. ‘He will come,’ she said; ‘yes, he will assuredly come.’ But days passed, and he neither came nor sent; at last, growing impatient, she called

again at his house ; then she learned that he had left London.

‘ He has flown from me,’ she thought ; ‘ he feels my influence, and fears it.’

But in this Eustasia was quite wrong. He was flying not from her but from himself. The wretched life of self-reproach and misery which he was compelled to lead was crushing him down so utterly that unless he made some effort he would sink and sicken. Die ? Well, after all, that would not have been so hard ; but the thought of leaving Alma was more than he could bear. He must live for the sake of the days which might yet be in store for them both.

He needed change, however, and he sought it for a few days on foreign soil. He went over one morning to Boulogne, took rooms in the Hôtel de Paris, and became one of the

swarm of tourists which was there filling the place.

The bathing season was then at its height, and people were all too busy to notice him ; he walked about like one in a dream, watching the pleasure-seekers, but pondering for ever on the old theme.

After all it was well for him that he had left England, he thought—the busy garrulous life of this place came as a relief after the dreary monotony of town. In the evenings he strolled out to the concerts or open-air dances, and observed the fisher girls with their lovers moving about in the gaslight ; while in the mornings he strolled about the sand watching with listless amusement the bathers who crowded down to the water's edge like bees in swarming time.

One morning, feeling more sick at heart than usual, he issued from the hotel and bent his steps towards the strand. On that day the scene was unusually animated. Flocks of fantastically-dressed children amused themselves by making houses in the sand, while their *bonnes* watched over them, and their mannnas, clad in equally fantastic costumes, besieged the bathing-machines. Bradley walked for a time on the sands watching the variegated crowd; it was amusing and distracting, and he was about to look around for a quiet spot in which he could spend an hour or so, when he was suddenly startled by an apparition.

A party of three were making their way towards the bathing-machines, and were even then within a few yards of him. One was a

child dressed in a showy costume of serge, with long curls falling upon his shoulders ; on one side of him was a French *bonne*, on the other a lady extravagantly attired in the most gorgeous of sea-side costumes. Her cheeks and lips were painted a bright red, but her skin was white as alabaster. She was laughing heartily at something which the little boy had said, when suddenly her eyes fell upon Bradley, who stood now within two yards of her.

It was his wife.

She did not pause nor shrink, but she ceased laughing, and a peculiar look of thinly veiled contempt passed over her face as she walked on. *

‘ *Maman*,’ said the child in French, ‘ who is that man, and why did he stare so at you ? ’

The lady shrugged her shoulders, and laughed again.

‘ He stared because he had nothing better to look at, I suppose, *chéri* ; but come, I shall miss my bath ; you had best stay here with Augustine, and make sand-hills till I rejoin you. *Au revoir*, Bébé.’

She left the child with the nurse, hastened on and entered one of the bathing-machines, which was immediately drawn down into the sea.

Bradley still stood where she had left him, and his eyes remained fixed upon the machine which held the woman whose very presence poisoned the air he breathed. All his old feelings of repulsion returned tenfold ; the very sight of the woman seemed to degrade and drag him down.

As he stood there the door of the machine opened, and she came forth again. This time

she was the wonder of all. Her shapely limbs were partly naked, and her body was covered with a quaintly cut bathing-dress of red. She called out some instructions to her nurse; then she walked down and entered the sea.

Bradley turned and walked away. He passed up the strand and sat down listlessly on one of the seats on the terrace facing the water. He took out Alma's last letter, and read it through, and the bitterness of his soul increased tenfold.

When would his misery end? he thought. Why did not death come and claim his own, and leave him free? Wherever he went his existence was poisoned by this miserable woman.

‘So it must ever be,’ he said bitterly. ‘I

must leave this place, for the very sight of her almost drives me mad.'

He rose and was about to move away, when he became conscious, for the first time, that something unusual was taking place. He heard sounds of crying and moaning, and everybody seemed to be rushing excitedly towards the sand. What it was all about Bradley could not understand, for he could see nothing. He stood and watched ; every moment the cries grew louder, and the crowd upon the sands increased. He seized upon a passing Frenchman, and asked what the commotion meant.

'*Ras de marée, monsieur!*' rapidly explained the man as he rushed onward.

Thoroughly mystified now, Bradley resolved to discover by personal inspection what it all meant. Leaving the terrace he leapt upon the

shore, and gained the waiting crowd upon the sand. To get an explanation from anyone here seemed to be impossible, for every individual member of the crowd seemed to have gone crazy. The women threw up their hands and moaned, the children screamed, while the men rushed half wildly about the sands.

Bradley touched the arm of a passing Englishman.

‘What is all this panic about?’ he said.

‘The *ras de marée*!’

‘Yes, but what is the *ras de marée*?’

‘Don’t you know? It is a sudden rising of the tide; it comes only once in three years. It has surprised the bathers, many of whom are drowning. See, several machines have gone to pieces, and the others are floating like drift-wood! Yonder are two boats out picking up

the people, but if the waves continue to rise like this they will never save them all. One woman from that boat has fainted ; no, good heavens, she is dead.'

The scene now became one of intense excitement. The water, rising higher and higher, was breaking now into waves of foam ; most of the machines were dashed about like corks upon the ocean, their frightened occupants giving forth the most fearful shrieks and cries. Suddenly there was a cry for the lifeboat ; immediately after it dashed down the sand, drawn by two horses, and was launched out upon the sea ; while Bradley and others occupied themselves in attending to those who were laid fainting upon the shore.

But the boats, rapidly as they went to work, proved insufficient to save the mass of fright-

ened humanity still struggling with the waves. The screams and cries became heartrending as one after another sank to rise no more. Suddenly there was another rush.

‘Leave the women to attend to the rescued,’ cried several voices. ‘Let the men swim out to the rescue of those who are exhausted in the sea.’

There was a rush to the water; among the first was Bradley, who, throwing off his coat, plunged boldly into the water. Many of those who followed him were soon overcome by the force of the waves and driven back to shore; but Bradley was a powerful swimmer, and went on.

He made straight for a figure which, seemingly overlooked by everyone else, was drifting rapidly out to sea. On coming nearer

he saw, by the long black hair, which floated around her on the water, that the figure was that of a woman. How she supported herself Bradley could not see ; she was neither swimming nor floating ; her back was towards him, and she might have fainted, for she made no sound.

On coming nearer he saw that she was supporting herself by means of a plank, part of the *débris* which had drifted from the broken machines. By this time he was quite near to her ;—she turned her face towards him, and he almost cried out in pain.

He recognised his wife !

Yes, there she was, helpless and almost fainting—her eyes were heavy, her lips blue ; and he seemed to be looking straight into the face of death. Bradley paused, and the two

gazed into each other's eyes. He saw that her strength was going, but he made no attempt to put out a hand to save her. He thought of the past, of the curse this woman had been to him ; and he knew that by merely doing nothing she would be taken from him.

Should he let her die? Why not? If he had not swum out she most assuredly would have sunk and been heard of no more. Again he looked at her and she looked at him : her eyes were almost closed now : having once looked into his face she seemed to have resigned all hopes of rescue.

No, he could not save her—the temptation was too great. He turned and swam in the direction of another figure which was floating helplessly upon the waves. He had only

taken three strokes when a violent revulsion of feeling came; with a terrible cry he turned again to the spot where he had left the fainting and drowning woman. But she was not there—the plank was floating upon the water—that was all.

Bradley dived, and reappeared holding the woman in his arms. Then he struck out with her to the shore.

It was a matter of some difficulty to get there, for she lay like lead in his hold. Having reached the shore, he carried her up the beach, and placed her upon the sand.

Then he looked to see if she was conscious.

Yes, she still breathed;—he gave her some brandy, and did all in his power to restore her to life. After a while she opened her eyes, and looked into Bradley's face.

‘ Ah, it is *you!*’ she murmured faintly, then, with a long-drawn sigh, she sank back, dead !

Still dripping from his encounter with the sea, his face as white as the dead face before him, Bradley stood like one turned to stone. Suddenly he was aroused by a heartrending shriek. The little boy whom he had seen with the dead woman broke from the hands of his nurse, and sobbing violently threw himself upon the dead body.

‘ *Maman ! maman !*’ he moaned.

The helpless cries of the child forced upon Bradley the necessity for immediate action. Having learned from the nurse the address of the house where ‘ Mrs. Montmorency ’ was staying, he had the body put upon a stretcher and conveyed there. He himself walked be-

side it, and the child followed, screaming and crying, in his nurse's arms.

Having reached the house, the body was taken into a room to be properly dressed, while Bradley tried every means in his power to console the child ! After a while he was told that all was done, and he went into the chamber of death.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE LAST LOOK.

Dead woman, shrouded white as snow
While Death the shade broods darkly nigh,
Place thy cold hand in mine, and so—
‘Good-bye.’

No prayer or blessing born of breath
Came from thy lips as thou didst die ;
I loath’d thee living, but in death—
‘Good-bye !’

So close together after all,
After long strife, stand thou and I,
I bless thee, while I faintly call—
‘Good-bye !’

Good-bye the past and all its pain,
Kissing thy poor dead hand, I cry—
Again, again, and yet again—
‘Good-bye!’—*The Exile : a Poem.*

It would have been difficult to analyse accurately the emotions which filled the bosom

of Ambrose Bradley, as he stood and looked upon the dead face of the woman who, according to the law of the land and the sacrament of the Church, had justly claimed to be his wife. He could not conceal from himself that the knowledge of her death brought relief to him and even joy; but mingled with that relief were other feelings less reassuring—pity, remorse even, and a strange sense of humiliation. He had never really loved the woman, and her conduct, previous to their long separation, had been such as to kill all sympathy in the heart of a less sensitive man, while what might be termed her unexpected resurrection had roused in him a bitterness and a loathing beyond expression. Yet now that the last word was said, the last atonement made, now that he beheld the eyes that would never open

again, and the lips that would never again utter speech or sound, his soul was stirred to infinite compassion.

After all, he thought, the blame had not been hers that they had been so ill-suited to each other, and afterwards, when they met in after years, she had not wilfully sought to destroy his peace. It had all been a cruel fatality, from the first: another proof of the pitiless laws which govern human nature, and make men and women suffer as sorely for errors of ignorance and inexperience as for crimes of knowledge.

He knelt by the bedside, and taking her cold hand kissed it solemnly. Peace was between them, he thought, then and for ever. *She* too, with all her faults and all her follies, had been a fellow-pilgrim by his side towards

the great bourne whence no pilgrim returns, and she had reached it first. He remembered now, not the woman who had flaunted her shamelessness before his eyes, but the pretty girl, almost a child, whom he had first known and fancied that he loved. In the intensity of his compassion and self-reproach he even exaggerated the tenderness he had once felt for her; the ignoble episode of their first intercourse catching a sad brightness reflected from the heavens of death. And in this mood, penitent and pitying, he prayed that God might forgive them both.

When he descended from the room, his eyes were red with tears. He found the little boy sobbing wildly in the room below, attended by the kindly Frenchwoman who kept the house. He tried to soothe him, but

found it impossible, his grief being most painful to witness, and violent in the extreme.

‘Ah, monsieur, it is indeed a calamity!’ cried the woman. ‘Madame was so good a mother, devoted to her child. But God is good—the little one has a father still!’

Bradley understood the meaning of her words, but did not attempt to undeceive her. His heart was welling over with tenderness towards the pretty orphan, and he was thinking too of his own harsh judgments on the dead, who, it was clear, had possessed many redeeming virtues, not the least of them being her attachment to her boy.

‘You are right, madame,’ he replied, sadly, ‘and the little one shall not lack fatherly love and care. Will you come with me for a few moments? I wish to speak to you alone.’

He placed his hand tenderly on the child's head, and again tried to soothe him, but he shrank away with petulant screams and cries. Walking to the front entrance he waited till he was joined there by the landlady, and they stood talking in the open air.

‘How long had she been here, madame?’ he asked.

‘For a month, monsieur,’ was the reply. ‘She came late in the season for the baths, with her *bonne* and the little boy, and took my rooms. Pardon, but I did not know madame had a husband living, and so near.’

‘We have been separated for many years. I came to Boulogne yesterday quite by accident, not dreaming the lady was here. Can you tell me if she has friends in Boulogne?’

‘I do not think so, monsieur. She lived quite alone, seeing no one, and her only thought and care was for the little boy. She was a proud lady, very rich and proud; nothing was too good for her, or for the child; she lived, as the saying is, *en princesse*. But no, she had no friends! Doubtless, being an English lady, though she spoke and looked like a *compatriote*, all her friends were in her own land.’

‘Just so,’ returned Bradley, turning his head away to hide his tears; for he thought to himself, ‘Poor Mary! After all, she was desolate like myself! How pitiful that I, of all men, should close her eyes and follow her to her last repose!’

‘Pardon, monsieur,’ said the woman, ‘but madame, perhaps, was not of our Church? She was, no doubt, Protestant?’

It was a simple question, but simple as it was Bradley was startled by it. He knew about as much of his dead wife's professed belief as of the source whence she had drawn her subsistence. But he replied :

‘ Yes, certainly. Protestant, of course.’

‘ Then monsieur will speak to the English clergyman, who dwells there on the hill ’ (here she pointed townward), ‘ close to the English church. He is a good man, Monsieur Robertson, and monsieur will find——’

‘ I will speak to him,’ interrupted Bradley. ‘ But I myself am an English clergyman, and shall doubtless perform the last offices, when the time comes.’

The woman looked at him in some astonishment, for his presence was the reverse of clerical, and his struggle in and with the sea had left his attire in most admired disorder ;

but she remembered the eccentricities of the nation to which he belonged, and her wonder abated. After giving the woman a few more general instructions, Bradley walked slowly and thoughtfully to his hotel.

More than once already his thoughts had turned towards Alma, but he had checked such thoughts and crushed them down in the presence of death ; left to himself, however, he could not conquer them, nor restrain a certain feeling of satisfaction in his newly-found freedom. He would write to Alma, as in duty bound, at once, and tell her of all that had happened. And then? It was too late, perhaps, to make full amends, to expect full forgiveness ; but it was his duty to give to her in the sight of the world the name he had once given to her secretly and in vain.

But the man's troubled spirit, sensitive to a degree, shrank from the idea of building up any new happiness on the grave of the poor woman whose corpse he had just quitted. Although he was now a free man legally, he still felt morally bound and fettered. All his wish and prayer was to atone for the evil he had brought on the one being he revered and loved. He did not dare, at least as yet, to think of uniting his unworthy life with a life so infinitely more beautiful and pure.

Yes, he would write to her. The question was, where his letter would find her, and how soon?

When he had last heard from her she was at Milan, but that was several weeks ago ; and since then, though he had written twice, there had been no response. She was possibly

travelling farther southward ; in all possibility, to Rome.

The next few days passed drearily enough. An examination of some letters recently received by the deceased discovered two facts—first, that she had a sister, living in Oxford, with whom she corresponded ; and, second, that her means of subsistence came quarterly from a firm of solicitors in Bedford Row, London. Next day the sister arrived by steamboat, accompanied by her husband, a small tradesman. Bradley interviewed the pair, and found them decent people, well acquainted with their relative's real position. The same day he received a communication from the solicitors, notifying that the annuity enjoyed by 'Mrs. Montmorency' lapsed with her decease, but that a large sum of money had been settled by the

late Lord Onbermere upon the child, the interest of the sum to be used for his maintenance and education, and the gross amount with additions and under certain reservations, to be at his disposal on attaining his majority.

On seeking an interview with the Rev. Mr. Robertson, the minister of the English Church, Bradley soon found that his reputation had preceded him.

‘Do I address the famous Mr. Bradley, who some time ago seceded from the English Church?’ asked the minister, a pale, elderly, clean-shaven man, bearing no little resemblance to a Roman Catholic priest.

Bradley nodded, and at once saw the not too cordial manner of the other sink to freezing point.

‘The unfortunate lady was your wife?’

‘Yes ; but we had been separated for many years.’

‘Ah, indeed !’ sighed the clergyman with a long-drawn sigh, a furtive glance of repulsion, and an inward exclamation of ‘no wonder !’

‘Although we lived apart, and although, to be frank, there was great misunderstanding between us, all that is over for ever, you understand. It is in a spirit of the greatest tenderness and compassion that I wish to conduct the funeral service—to which I presume there is no objection.’

Mr. Robertson started in amazement, as if a bomb had exploded under his feet.

‘To conduct the funeral service ! But you have seceded from the Church of England.’

‘In a sense, yes ; but I have never done so formally. I am still an English clergyman.’

‘I could never consent to such a thing,’ cried the other, indignantly. ‘I should look upon it as profanity. Your published opinions are known to me, sir; they have shocked me inexpressibly; and not only in my opinion, but in that of my spiritual superiors, they are utterly unworthy of one calling himself a Christian.’

‘Then you refuse me permission to officiate?’

‘Most emphatically. More than that, I shall require some assurance that the lady did not share your heresies, before I will suffer the interment to take place in the precincts of my church.’

‘Is not my assurance sufficient?’

‘No, sir, it is *not!*’ exclaimed the clergyman with scornful dignity. ‘I do not wish to

say anything offensive, but, speaking as a Christian and a pastor of the English Church, I can attach no weight whatever to the assurances of one who is, in the public estimation, nothing better than an avowed infidel. Good morning !'

So saying, with a last withering look, the clergyman turned on his heel and walked away.

Seeing that remonstrance was useless, and might even cause public scandal, Bradley forthwith abandoned his design ;, but at his suggestion his wife's sister saw the incumbent, and succeeded in convincing him that Mrs. Montmorency had died in the true faith. The result of Mr. Robertson's pious indignation was soon apparent. The sister and her husband, who had hitherto treated Bradley

with marked respect, now regarded him with sullen dislike and suspicion. They could not prevent him, however, from following as chief mourner, when the day of the funeral came.

That funeral was a dismal enough experience for Ambrose Bradley. Never before had he felt so keenly the vanity of his own creed and the isolation of his own opinions, as when he stood by the graveside and listened to the last solemn words of the English burial service. He seemed like a black shadow in the sacred place. The words of promise and resurrection had little meaning for one who had come to regard the promise as only beautiful 'poetry,' and the resurrection as only a poet's dream. And though the sense of his own sin lay on his heart like lead, he saw no

benign Presence blessing the miserable woman who had departed, upraising her on wings of gladness ; all he perceived was Death's infinite desolation, and the blackness of that open grave.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE SIREN.

Weave a circle round him thrice. . . .
 For he on honey-dew hath fed,} *Kubla Khan.*
 And drunk the milk of Paradise.

BRADLEY'S first impulse, on quitting Boulogne, was to hasten at once on to Italy, seek out Alma, and tell her all that had occurred; but that impulse was no sooner felt than it was conquered. The man had a quickening conscience left, and he could not have stood just then before the woman he loved without the bitterest pain and humiliation. No, he would write to her, he would break the news gently

by letter, not by word of mouth ; and afterwards, perhaps, when his sense of spiritual agony had somewhat worn away, he would go to her and throw himself upon her tender mercy. So instead of flying on to Italy he returned by the mail to London, and thence wrote at length to Alma, giving her full details of his wife's death.

By this time the man was so broken in spirit and so changed in body, that even his worst enemies might have pitied him. The trouble of the last few months had stript him of all his intellectual pride, and left him supremely sad.

But now, as ever, the mind of the man, though its light was clouded, turned in the direction of celestial or supermundane things. Readers who are differently constituted, and

who regard such speculations as trivial or irrelevant, will doubtless have some difficulty in comprehending an individual who, through all vicissitudes of moral experience, invariably returned to the one set purpose of spiritual inquiry. To him one thing was paramount, even over all his own sorrows—the solution of the great problem of human life and immortality. This was his haunting idea, his monomania, so to speak. Just as a physiologist would examine his own blood under the microscope, just as a scientific inquirer would sacrifice his own life and happiness for the verification of a theory, so would Bradley ask himself, even when on the rack of moral torment, How far does this suffering help me to a solution of the mystery of life?

True, for a time he had been indifferent,

even callous, drifting, on the vague current of agnosticism, he knew not whither ; but that did not last for long : the very constitution of Bradley saved him from that indifference which is the chronic disease of so many modern men.

Infinitely tender of heart, he had been moved to the depths by his recent experience ; he had felt, as all of us at some time feel, the sanctifying and purifying power of Death. A mean man would have exulted in the new freedom Death had brought ; Bradley, on the other hand, stood stupefied and aghast at his own liberation. On a point of conscience he could have fought with, and perhaps conquered, all the prejudices of society ; but when his very conscience turned against him he was paralysed with doubt, wonder, and despair.

He returned to London, and there awaited Alma's answer. One day, urged by a sudden impulse, he bent his steps towards the mysterious house in Bayswater, and found Eustasia Mapleleaf sitting alone. Never had the little lady looked so strange and *spirituelle*. Her elfin-like face looked pale and worn, and her great wistful eyes were surrounded with dark melancholy rings. But she looked up as he entered, with her old smile.

‘I knew you would come,’ she cried. ‘I was thinking of you, and I felt the celestial agencies were going to bring us together. And I’m real glad to see you before we go away.’

‘You are leaving London?’ asked Bradley, as he seated himself close to her.

‘Yes. Salem talks of going back home

before winter sets in and the fogs begin. I don't seem able to breathe right in this air. If I stopped here long, I think I should die.'

As she spoke, she passed her thin transparent hand across her forehead, with a curious gesture of pain. As Bradley looked at her steadfastly she averted his gaze, and a faint hectic flush came into her cheeks.

'Guess you think it don't matter much,' she continued with the sharp nervous laugh peculiar to her, 'whether I live or die. Well, Mr. Bradley, I suppose you're right, and I'm sure I don't care much how soon I go.'

'You are very young to talk like that,' said Bradley gently; 'but perhaps I misunderstand you, and you mean that you would gladly exchange this life for freer activity and larger happiness in another?'

Eustasia laughed again, but this time she looked full into her questioner's eyes.

‘I don't know about that,’ she replied. ‘What I mean is that I am downright tired, and should just like a good long spell of sleep.’

‘But surely, if your belief is true, you look for something more than that?’

‘I don't think I do. You mean I want to join the spirits, and go wandering about from one planet to another, or coming down to earth and making people uncomfortable? That seems a *stupid* sort of life, doesn't it?—about as stupid as this one? I'd rather tuck my head under my wing, like a little bird, and go to sleep for ever!’

Bradley opened his eyes, amazed and a little disconcerted by the lady's candour. Before he could make any reply she continued, in a low voice :

‘ You see, I’ve got no one in the world to care for me, except Salem, my brother. He’s good to me, he is, but that doesn’t make up for everything. I don’t feel like a girl, but like an old woman. I’d rather be one of those foolish creatures you meet everywhere, who think of nothing but millinery and flirtation, than what I am. That’s all the good the spirits have done me, to spoil my good looks and make me old before my time. I hate them sometimes; I hate myself for listening to them, and I say what I said before—that if I’m to live on as *they* do, and go on in the same curious way, I’d sooner die!’

‘ I wish you would be quite honest with me,’ said Bradley, after a brief pause. ‘ I see you are ill, and I am sure you are unhappy. Suppose much of your illness, and all your

unhappiness, came from your acquiescence in a scheme of folly and self-deception? You already know my opinion on these matters to which you allude. If I may speak quite frankly, I have always suspected you and your brother—but your brother more than you—of a conspiracy to deceive the public; and if I were not otherwise interested in you, if I did not feel for you the utmost sympathy and compassion, I should pass the matter by without a word. As it is, I would give a great deal if I could penetrate into the true motives of your conduct, and ascertain how far you are self-deluded.’

‘It’s no use,’ answered Eustasia, shaking her head sadly. ‘I can’t explain it all even to myself; impossible to explain to you.’

‘But do you seriously and verily believe in

the truth of these so-called spiritual manifestations?’

‘Guess I do,’ returned the lady, with a decided nod.

‘You believe in them, even while you admit their stupidity, their absurdity?’

‘If you ask me, I think life is a foolish business altogether. That’s why I’d like to be done with it!’

‘But surely if spiritualism were an accepted fact, it would offer a solution of all the mysterious phenomena of human existence? It would demonstrate, at all events, that our experience does not cease with the body, which limits its area so much.’

Eustasia sighed wearily, and folding her thin hands on her knee, looked wearily at the fire, which flickered faintly in the grate. With

all her candour of speech, she still presented to her interlocutor an expression of mysterious evasiveness. Nor was there any depth in her complaining sorrow. It seemed rather petulant and shallow than really solemn and profound.

‘I wish you wouldn’t talk about it,’ she said. ‘Talk to me about yourself, Mr. Bradley. You’ve been in trouble, I know; *they* told me. I’ve liked you ever since I first saw you, and I wish I could give you some help.’

Had Bradley been a different kind of man, he would scarcely have misunderstood the look she gave him then, full as it was of passionate admiration which she took no care to veil. Bending towards him, and looking into his eyes, she placed her hand on his; and the warm touch of the tremulous fingers went

through him with a curious thrill. Nor did she withdraw the hand as she continued :

‘I’ve only seen one man in the world like *you*. He’s dead, he is. But you’re his image. I told Salem so the day I first saw you. Some folks say that souls pass from one body into another, and I almost believe it when I think of him and look at *you*.’

As she spoke, with tears in her eyes and a higher flush on her cheek, there was a footstep in the room, and looking up she saw her brother, who had entered unperceived. His appearance was fortunate, as it perhaps saved her from some further indiscretions. Bradley, who had been too absorbed in the thoughts awakened by her first question to notice the peculiarity of her manner, held out his hand to the new-comer.

‘Glad to see you again,’ said the Professor. ‘I suppose Eustasia has told you that we’re going back to the States? I calculate we haven’t done much good by sailing over. The people of England are a whole age behind the Americans, and won’t be ripe for our teaching till many a year has passed.’

‘When do you leave London?’

‘In eight days. We’re going to take passage in the “Maria,” which sails to-morrow week.’

‘Then you will give no more *séances*? I am sorry, for I should have liked to come again.’

Eustasia started, and looked eagerly at her brother.

‘Will you come *to-night*?’ she asked suddenly.

‘To-night!’ echoed Bradley. ‘Is a *séance* to be held?’

‘No, no,’ interrupted Mapleleaf.

‘But yes,’ added Eustasia. ‘We shall be alone, but that will be all the better. I should not like to leave England without convincing Mr. Bradley that there is something in your solar biology after all.’

‘You’ll waste your time, Eustasia,’ remarked the Professor drily. ‘You know what the poet says?’

A man convinced against his will
Is of the same opinion still.

And I guess you’ll never convert Mr. Bradley.’

‘I’ll try, at any rate,’ returned Eustasia, smiling; then turning to the clergyman with an eager wistful look, she added, ‘You’ll come, won’t you? To-night at seven.’

Bradley promised, and immediately afterwards took his leave. He had not exaggerated in expressing his regret at the departure of the curious pair; for since his strange experience at Boulogne he was intellectually unstrung, and eager to receive spiritual impressions, even from a quarter which he distrusted. He unconsciously felt, too, the indescribable fascination which Eustasia, more than most women, knew how to exert on highly organised persons of the opposite sex.

Left alone, the brother and sister looked at each other for some moments in silence; then the Professor exclaimed half angrily:

‘ You’ll kill yourself, Eustasia, that’s what *you’ll* do! I’ve foreseen it all along, just as I foresaw it when you first met Ulysses S. Stedman. You’re clean gone on this man, and

if I wasn't ready to protect you, Lord knows you'd make a fool of yourself again.'

Eustasia looked up in his face and laughed. It was curious to note her change of look and manner; her face was still pale and elfin-like, but her eyes were full of malicious light.

'Never mind, Salem,' she replied. 'You just leave Mr. Bradley to me.'

'He's not worth spooning over, said Mapleleaf indignantly; 'and let me tell you, Eustasia, you're not strong enough to go on like this. Think of your state of health! Doctor Quin says you'll break up if you don't take care!'

He paused, and looked at her in consternation. She was lying back in the sofa with her thin arms joined behind her head, and 'crooning' to herself, as was her frequent habit.

This time the words and tune were from a familiar play, which she had seen represented at San Francisco.

Black spirits and white,
Blue spirits and grey,
Mingle, mingle, mingle,
You that mingle may!

‘I do believe you’re downright *mad!*’ exclaimed the little Professor. ‘Tell me the truth, Eustasia—do you love this man Bradley?’

Eustasia ceased singing, but remained in the same attitude.

‘I loved him who is dead,’ she replied, ‘and I love Mr. Bradley because he is so like the other. If you give me time I will win him over; I will make him love *me*.’

‘What nonsense you’re talking!’

‘Nonsense? It’s the truth!’ cried Eus-

tasia, springing up and facing her brother. 'Why should I not love him? Why should he not love me? Am I to spend all my life like a slave, with no one to care for me, no one to give me a kind word? I won't do it. I want to be free. I'm tired of sitting at home all day alone, and playing the sibyl to the fools you bring here at night. Lord knows I haven't long to live; before I die I want to draw in one good long breath of love and joy! Perhaps it will kill me as you say—so much the better—I should like to die like that!'

'Eustasia, will you listen to reason?' exclaimed the distracted Professor. 'You're following a will-o'-the-wisp, that's what you are! This man don't care about any woman in the world but one, and you're wasting your precious time.'

‘I know my power, and you know it too, Salem. I’m going to bring him to my feet.’

‘How, Eustasia?’

‘Wait, and you will see!’ answered the girl, with her low, nervous laugh.

‘Think better of it!’ persisted her brother. ‘You promised me, after Ulysses S. Stedman died, to devote all your life, strength, and thought to the beautiful cause of scientific spiritualism. Nature has made you a living miracle, Eustasia! I do admire to see one so gifted throwing herself away, just like a school-girl, on the first good-looking man she meets!’

‘I hate spiritualism,’ was the reply. ‘What has it done for me? Broken my heart, Salem, and wasted my life. I’ve dwelt too long with ghosts; I want to feel my life as other women do. And I tell you I *will*!’

‘The poor Professor shook his head dubiously, but saw that there was no more to be said—at any rate just then.

At seven o’clock that evening Bradley returned to the house in Bayswater, and found the brother and sister waiting for him.

Eustasia wore a loose-fitting robe of black velvet, cut low round the bust, and without sleeves. Her neck and arms were beautifully though delicately moulded, white and glistening as satin, and the small serpent-like head, with its wonderfully brilliant eyes, was surmounted by a circlet of pearls.

Bradley looked at her in surprise. Never before had she seemed so weirdly pretty.

The Professor, on the other hand, despite his gnome-like brow, appeared unusually igno-

ble and commonplace. He was ill at ease, too, and cast distrustful glances from time to time at his sister, whose manner was as brilliant as her appearance, and who seemed to have cast aside the depression which she had shown during the early part of the day.

After some little desultory conversation, Bradley expressed his impatience for the *séance* to begin. The landlady of the house, herself (as the reader is aware) an adept, was therefore summoned to give the party, and due preparations made by drawing the window-blinds and extinguishing the gas. Before the lights were quite put out, however, the Professor addressed his sister.

‘Eustasia, you’re not well! Say the word, and I’m sure Mr. Bradley will excuse you for to-night.’

The appeal was in vain, Eustasia persisting. The *séance* began. The Professor and Mrs. Piozzi Smith were *vis-à-vis*, while Eustasia, her back towards the folding-doors communicating to the inner chamber, sat opposite to Bradley.

The clergyman was far less master of himself than on the former occasions. No sooner did he find himself in total darkness than his heart began to beat with great muffled throbs, and nervous thrills ran through his frame. Before there was the slightest intimation of any supernatural presence, he seemed to see before him the dead face of his wife, white and awful as he had beheld it in that darkened chamber at Boulogne. Then the usual manifestations began ; bells were rung, faint lights flashed hither and thither, the table round which they

were seated rose in the air, mysterious hands were passed over Bradley's face. He tried to retain his self-possession, but found it impossible ; a sickening sense of horror and fearful anticipation overmastered him, so that the clammy sweat stood upon his brow, and his body trembled like a reed.

Presently the voice of the little Professor was heard saying :

‘ Who is present ? Will any of our dear friends make themselves known ? ’

There was a momentary pause. Then an answer came in the voice of Eustasia, but deeper and less clear.

‘ I am here. ’

‘ Who are you ? ’

‘ Laura, a spirit of the winged planet Jupiter. I speak through the bodily mouth of

our dear sister, who is far away, walking with my brethren by the lake of golden fire.'

'Are you alone?'

'No! others are present—I see them passing to and fro. One is bright and beautiful. Her face is glorious, but she wears a raiment like a shroud.'

'What does that betoken?'

'It betokens that she has only just died.'

A shiver ran through Bradley's frame. Could the dead indeed be present? and if so, what dead? His thoughts flew back once more to that miserable death-chamber by the sea. The next moment something like a cold hand touched him, and a low voice murmured in his ear:

'Ambrose! are you listening? It is I!'

'Who speaks?' he murmured under breath.

'Alma! Do you know me?'

Was it possible? Doubtless his phantasy deceived him, but he seemed once more to hear the very tones of her he loved.

‘Do not move!’ continued the voice. ‘Perhaps this is a last meeting for a long time, for I am called away. It is your Alma’s spirit that speaks to you; her body lies dead at Rome.’

A wild cry burst from Bradley’s lips, and he sank back in his chair, paralysed and overpowered.

‘It is a cheat!’ he gasped. ‘It is no spirit that is speaking to me, but a living woman.’

And he clutched in the direction of the voice, but touched only the empty air.

‘If you break the conditions, I must depart!’ cried the voice faintly, as if from a distant part of the room.

‘Shall I break up the *séance*?’ asked the Professor.

‘No!’ cried Bradley, again joining his hands with those of his neighbours to complete the circle. ‘Go on! go on!’

‘Are our dear friends still present?’ demanded the Professor.

‘I am here,’ returned the voice of Eustasia. ‘I see the spirit of a woman, weeping and wringing her hands; it is she that wears the shroud. She speaks to me. She tells us that her earthly name was a word which signifies holy.’

‘In God’s name,’ cried Bradley, ‘what does it mean? She of whom you speak is not dead?—no, no!’

Again he felt the touch of a clammy hand, and again he heard the mysterious voice.

‘Death is nothing ; it is only a mystery—a change. The body is nothing ; the spirit is all-present and all-powerful. Keep quiet ; and I will try to materialise myself even more.’

He sat still in shivering expectation ; then he felt a touch like breath upon his forehead, and two lips, warm with life, were pressed close to his, while at the same moment he felt what seemed a human bosom heaving against his own. If this phenomenon was supernatural, it was certainly very real ; for the effect was of warm and living flesh. Certain now that he was being imposed upon, Bradley determined to make certain by seizing the substance of the apparition. He had scarcely, however, withdrawn his arms from the circle, when the phenomenon ceased ; there was a loud cry from the others present ; and on the

gas being lit, Eustasia and the rest were seen sitting quietly in their chairs, the former just recovering from a state of trance.

‘I warned you, Eustasia,’ cried the Professor indignantly. ‘I knew Mr. Bradley was not a fair inquirer, and would be certain to break the conditions.’

‘It is an outrage,’ echoed the lady of the house. ‘The heavenly intelligences will never forgive us.’

Without heeding these remonstrances, Bradley, deathly pale, was gazing intently at Eustasia. She met his gaze quietly enough, but her heightened colour and sparkling eyes betokened that she was labouring under great excitement.

‘It is infamous!’ he cried. ‘I am certain *now* that this is a vile conspiracy.’

‘Take care, sir, take care!’ exclaimed the Professor. ‘There’s law in the land, and——’

‘Hush, Salem!’ said Eustasia gently. ‘Mr. Bradley does not mean what he says. He is too honourable to make charges which he cannot substantiate, even against a helpless girl. He is agitated by what he has seen to-night, but he will do us justice when he has thought it over.’

Without replying, Bradley took up his hat and moved to the door; but, turning suddenly, he again addressed the medium:

‘I cannot guess by what means you have obtained your knowledge of my private life, but you are trading upon it to destroy the happiness of a fellow-creature. God forgive you! Your own self-reproach and self-contempt will avenge me; I cannot wish you any

sorer punishment than the infamy and degradation of the life you lead.'

With these words he would have departed, but, swift as lightning, Eustasia flitted across the room and blocked his way.

'Don't go yet!' she cried. 'Of what do you accuse me? Why do you blame me for what the spirits have done?'

'The spirits!' he repeated bitterly. 'I'm not a child, to be so easily befooled. In one sense, indeed, you have conjured up devils, who some day or another will compass your own destruction.'

'That's true enough—they *may* be devils,' said Eustasia. 'Salem knows—we all know—that we can't prevent the powers of evil from controlling the powers of good, and coming in their places. Guess some of them have been at

work to-night. Mr. Bradley, perhaps it's our last meeting on earth. Won't you shake hands?'

As she spoke her wild eyes were full of tears, which streamed down her face. Acting under a sudden impulse, Bradley took her outstretched hand, held it firmly, and looked her in the face.

'Confess the cheat, and I will freely forgive you. It was *you* personated one who is dear to me, and whom you pretended to be a spirit risen from the grave.'

'Don't answer him, Eustasia!' exclaimed the Professor. 'He ought to know that's impossible, for you never left your seat.'

'Certainly not,' said Mrs. Piozzi Smith.

But Bradley, not heeding the interruption, still watched the girl and grasped her passive hand.

‘ Answer me ! Tell me the truth ! ’

‘ How can I tell you ? ’ answered Eustasia.

‘ I was tranced, and my spirit was far away. I don’t even know what happened.’

With a contemptuous gesture, Bradley released her, and walked from the room. All his soul revolted at the recent experience ; yet mingled with his angry scepticism was a certain vague sense of dread. If, after all, he had not been deceived, and something had happened to Alma ; if, as the *séance* seemed to suggest, she was no longer living ! The very thought almost turned his brain. Dazed and terrified, he made his way down the dark passage and left the house.

No sooner had he gone than Eustasia uttered a low cry, threw her arms into the air, and sank swooning upon the floor.

Her brother raised her in a moment, and placed her upon the sofa. It was some minutes before she recovered. When she did so, and gazed wildly around, there was a tiny fleck of red upon her lips, like blood.

She looked up in her brother's face, and began laughing hysterically.

‘Eustasia! For God's sake, control yourself! You'll make yourself downright ill!’

Presently the hysterical fit passed away.

‘Leave us together, please!’ she said to the grim woman of the house. ‘I—I wish to speak to my brother.’

Directly the woman had retired, she took her brother by the hand.

‘Don't be angry with me, Salem!’ she said softly. ‘I'm not long for this world now, and I want you to grant me one request.’

‘What is it, Eustasia?’ asked the Professor, touched by her strangely tender manner.

‘Don’t take me away from England just yet. Wait a little while longer.’

‘Eustasia, let me repeat, you’re following a will-o’-the-wisp, you are indeed! Take my advice, and never see that man again!’

‘I must—I will!’ she cried. ‘O Salem, I’ve used him cruelly, but I love him! I shall die now if you take me away!’

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE ETERNAL CITY.

In the night of the seven-hill'd city, disrobed, and uncrown'd,
and undone,

Thou moanest, O Rizpah, Madonna, and countest the bones of
thy son.

The bier is vacant above thee, His corpse is no longer thereon,
A wind came out of the dark, and he fell as a leaf, and is gone!

They have taken thy crown, O Rizpah, and driven thee forth
with the swine,

But the bones of thy Son they have left thee—yea, wash them
with tears—they are thine!

Thou moanest an old incantation, thou troublest earth with thy
cries. . . .

Ah, God, if the bones should hear thee, and join once again,
and arise!—*Rome: a Poem.*

As the days passed, Bradley found his state of
suspense and anxiety intolerable. Day after
day he had hoped to hear from Alma, until at
length disappointment culminated in despair.

He then determined he should know with certainty what had become of her, and resolved to go to Milan.

What he had seen at the *séance* had impressed him more than he would admit to himself. He could not believe that any evil had happened—he would not believe it without the most positive evidence of the fact. So he said to himself one hour, and the next his heart grew sick with an uncontrollable dread; and he refused to hope that the revelation of the *séance* was a delusion.

He left his home and proceeded to the station in the former mood, but the train had hardly moved from the platform when his despair seized him, and if he could he would have relinquished the journey. Alternating thus between hope and despair, he travelled

without a break, and in due course he reached Milan.

His inquiries about Alma were promptly answered.

The beautiful and wealthy English lady was well known. She had, until quite recently, been the occupant of a splendid suite of apartments in the best quarter of the city ; but she had gone.

Bradley heard all this, and almost savagely he repeated after his informant, an old Italian waiter who spoke English well, the word ‘Gone!’

‘Gone where?’ he demanded. ‘You must know where she has gone to?’

‘Yes, Signor ; she has gone to Rome!’

‘To Rome ! And her address there is——?’

‘That I do not know, Signor.’

‘Have me taken to the house she occupied when here,’ Bradley ordered; and he was driven to the house Alma had dwelt in.

There also he failed to learn Alma’s address. All that was known was that she had gone to Rome; that her departure had been sudden, and that she had said she would not return to Milan.

Dismissing the carriage that had brought him, he walked back to his hotel.

It was night; the cool breeze from the Alps was delightfully refreshing after the sultry heat of the day; the moon was full and the fair old city was looking its fairest, but these things Bradley heeded not. Outward beauty he could not see, for all his mind and soul was dark—the ancient palaces, the glorious Cathedral, the splendid Carrara marble statue of Leonardo,

and the bronze one of Cavour, were passed unnoticed and uncared for. One thing only was in his mind—to get to Rome to find Alma. One thing was certain: she had left Milan in good health, and must surely be safe still

‘Ah!’ he said to himself, ‘when did she leave Milan? Fool that I am, not to have learned,’ and, almost running, he returned to the house and inquired.

He was disappointed with the information he received. Alma had left Milan some time before the *séance* in London had been held.

Entering a restaurant, he found that he could get a train to Rome at midnight. He returned to his hotel, ate a morsel of food, drank some wine, and then went to the railway station.

It was early morning when he entered the

Eternal City, and the lack of stir upon the streets troubled and depressed him. It accentuated the difference between his present visit and the last he had made, and he cried in his heart most bitterly that the burden of his sorrow was too great.

He was about to tell the driver of the fiacre to take him to his old quarters on the Piazza di Spagna, when he changed his mind. If he went there he would be in the midst of his countrymen, and in his then mood the last being he wished to see was an Englishman. So he asked the driver to take him to any quiet and good boarding-house he knew, and was taken to one in the Piazza Sta. Maria in Monti.

In the course of the day he went out to learn what he could of Alma.

He met several acquaintances, but they had neither seen nor heard of her ; indeed, they were not in her circle, and though they had seen or heard of her, they would hardly have remembered. Bradley well knew the families Alma would be likely to visit, but he shrank from inquiring at their houses ; he went to the doors of several and turned away without asking to be admitted.

By-and-by he went into the Caffè Nuovo, and eagerly scanned the papers, but found no mention of Alma in them. A small knot of young Englishmen and Americans sat near to him, and he thought at last that he caught the name of Miss Craik mentioned in their conversation.

He listened with painful attention, and found that they were speaking of some one the Jesuits had ‘hooked,’ as they put it.

‘And, by Jove, it was a haul!’ one young fellow said. ‘Any amount of cash, I am told.’

‘That is so,’ replied one of his comrades; ‘and the girl is wonderfully beautiful, they say.’

Bradley started at this, and listened more intently than before.

‘Yes,’ the first speaker said, ‘she is beautiful. I had her pointed out to me in Milan, and I thought her the best-looking woman I had ever seen.’

‘Excuse me,’ said Bradley, stepping up to the speakers. ‘I—I would like to know the name of the lady you refer to.’

‘Oh, certainly; her name is Miss Alma Craik.’

‘Alma living!’ Bradley shrieked, and staggered, like one in drink, out of the caffè.

Dazed and half maddened, he found his way to the lodging. He locked the door of his room and paced the floor, now clenching his hands together, then holding his forehead in them as if to still its bounding pain.

‘Taken by the Jesuits!’ he muttered. ‘Then she is dead indeed—ay, worse than dead!’

He paused at length at the window and looked out. The next instant he sprang back with a look of utter horror on his face.

‘What if she is over *there*!’ he gasped, and sank into a chair.

By over there he meant the convent of the Farnesiani nuns. From the window he could see down the *cul-de-sac* that led to the convent. He knew the place well; he knew it to be well deserving of its name, the Living Tomb, and that

of its inmates it was said ' they daily die and dig their own graves.'

If Alma was indeed in there, then she was lost.

Bradley shook off as far as he could his feeling of helplessness and hopelessness, and with frenzied haste he rose from the chair, left the house, and went over towards the convent.

He knew that the only way to communicate with the inmates was to mount to a platform above the walls of the houses, and to rap on a barrel projecting from the platform. He had once been there and had been admitted. He forgot that then he had proper credentials, and that now he had none.

He was soon on the platform, and not only rapped, but thundered on the barrel.

A muffled voice from the interior demanded his business.

His reply was whether an Englishwoman named Craik was within the convent. To that question he had no answer, and the voice within did not speak again.

He stayed long and repeated his question again and again in the hope of obtaining an answer, and only left when he had attracted attention, and was invited by the police to desist.

What was to be done? he asked himself as he stood in the street. Do something he must, but what?

‘I have it!’ he said. ‘I will go to the Jesuit head-quarters and demand to be informed;’ and putting his resolve into action he walked thither.

He was courteously received, and asked his business.

‘My business is a painful one,’ Bradley began. ‘I wish to know if an English lady named Craik has joined your church?’

‘She did return to the true faith,’ replied the priest, raising his eyes to heaven, ‘and for her return the Holy Virgin and the Saints be praised!’

‘And *now*—where is she *now*?’

With painful expectancy he waited for the priest to answer.

‘Now! now, Signor, she is *dead*!’ was the reply.

Bradley heard, and fell prone upon the floor.

On recovering from his swoon, Bradley found himself surrounded by several priests,

one of whom was sprinkling his face with water, while another was beating the palms of his hands. Pale and trembling, he struggled to his feet, and gazed wildly around him, until his eyes fell upon the face of the aged official whom he had just accosted. He endeavoured to question him again, but the little Italian at his command seemed to have forsaken him, and he stammered and gasped in a kind of stupefaction.

At this moment he heard a voice accost him in excellent English; a softly musical voice, full of beautiful vibrations.

‘I am sorry, sir, at your indisposition. If you will permit me, I will conduct you back to your hotel.’

The speaker, like his companions, had the clean-shaven face of a priest, but his expression

was bright and good-humoured. His eyebrows were black and prominent, but his hair was white as snow.

Bradley clutched him by the arm.

‘What—what does it mean? I must have been dreaming. I came here to inquire after a dear friend—a lady; and that man told me—told me——’

‘Pray calm yourself,’ said the stranger gently. ‘First let me take you home, and then I myself will give you whatever information you desire.’

‘No!’ cried Bradley, ‘I will have the truth *now!*’

And as he faced the group of priests his eyes flashed and his hands were clenched convulsively. To his distracted gaze they seemed like evil spirits congregated for his torture and torment.

‘What is it you desire to know?’ demanded he who had spoken in English. As he spoke he glanced quietly at his companions, with a significant movement of the eyebrows; and, as if understanding the sign, they withdrew from the apartment, leaving himself and Bradley quite alone.

‘Pray sit down,’ he continued gently, before Bradley could answer his former question.

But the other paid no attention to the request.

‘Do not trifle with me,’ he cried, ‘but tell me at once what I demand to know. I have been to the convent, seeking one who is said to have recently joined your church—which God forbid! When I mentioned her name I received no answer; but it is common gossip that a lady bearing her name was re-

cently taken there. You can tell me if this is true.'

The priest looked at him steadfastly, and, as it seemed, very sadly.

'Will you tell me the lady's name?'

'She is known as Miss Alma Craik, but she has a right to another name, which she shall bear.'

'Alas!' said the other, with a deep sigh and a look full of infinite compassion, 'I knew the poor lady well. Perhaps, if you have been in correspondence with her, she mentioned my name—the Abbé Brest?'

'Never,' exclaimed Bradley.

'What is it you wish to know concerning her? I will help you as well as I can.'

'First, I wish to be assured that that man lied (though of course I *know* he lied) when he

said that evil had happened to her, that—that she had died. Next, I demand to know where she is, that I may speak to her. Do not attempt to keep her from me! I *will* see her!’

The face of the Abbé seemed to harden, while his eyes retained their sad, steadfast gaze.

‘Pardon me,’ he said after a moment’s reflection, ‘and do not think that I put the question in rudeness or with any want of brotherly sympathy—but by what right do you, a stranger, solicit this information? If I give it you, I must be able to justify myself before my superiors. The lady, or, as I should rather say, our poor Sister, is, as I understand, in no way related to you by blood?’

‘She is my *wife*!’ answered Bradley.

It was now the other’s turn to express, or

at least assume, astonishment. Uttering an incredulous exclamation, he raised his eyes to heaven, and slightly elevated his hands.

‘Do you think I lie?’ cried Bradley sternly. ‘Do you think I lie, like those of your church, whose trade it is to do so? I tell you I have come here to claim her who is my wife, by the laws of man and God!’

Again the Abbé repeated his pantomime expressive of pitiful incredulity.

‘Surely you deceive yourself,’ he said. ‘Miss Craik was never married. She lived unmarried, and in blessed virginity was baptised into our church.’

‘Where is she? Let me speak to her!’ cried Bradley, with a sudden access of his old passion.

The Abbé pointed upward.

‘She is with the saints of heaven!’ he said, and crossed himself.

Again the unfortunate clergyman’s head went round, and again he seemed about to fall; but recovering himself with a shuddering effort, he clutched the priest by the arm, exclaiming—

‘Torture me no more! You are juggling with my life, as you have done with hers. But tell me it is all false, and I will forgive you. Though you are a priest, you have at least the heart of a man. Have pity! If what you have said is true, I am destroyed body and soul—yes, body and soul! Have mercy upon me! Tell me my darling is not dead!’

The Abbé’s face went white as death, and at the same moment his lustrous eyes seemed to fill with tears. Trembling violently, he

took Bradley's hand, and pressed it tenderly. Then releasing him, he glanced upward and turned towards the door of the chamber.

'Stay here till I return,' he said in a low voice, and disappeared.

Half swooning, Bradley sank into a chair, covering his face with his hands. A quarter of an hour passed, and he still remained in the same position. Tears streamed from his eyes, and from time to time he moaned aloud in complete despair. Suddenly he felt a touch upon his shoulder, and looking up he again encountered the compassionate eyes of the Abbé Brest.

'Come with me !' the Abbé said.

Bradley was too lost in his own wild fears and horrible conjectures to take any particular note of the manner of the priest. Had he done

so, he would have perceived that it betrayed no little hesitation and agitation. But he rose eagerly, though as it were mechanically, and followed the Abbé to the door.

A minute afterwards they were walking side by side in the open sunshine.

To the bewildered mind of Ambrose Bradley it all seemed like a dream. The sunlight dazzled his brain so that his eyes could scarcely see, and he was only conscious of hurrying along through a crowd of living ghosts.

Suddenly he stopped, tottering.

‘What is the matter?’ cried the Abbé, supporting him. ‘You are ill again, I fear; let me call a carriage.’

And, suiting the action to the word, he beckoned up a carriage which was just then

passing. By this time Bradley had recovered from his momentary faintness.

‘Where are you taking me?’ he demanded.

‘Get in, and I will tell you!’ returned the other; and when Bradley had seated himself, he leant over to the driver and said something in a low voice.

Bradley repeated his question, while the vehicle moved slowly away.

‘I am going to make inquiries,’ was the reply; ‘and as an assurance of my sympathy and good faith, I have obtained permission for you to accompany me. But let me now conjure you to summon all your strength to bear the inevitable; and let it be your comfort if, as I believe and fear, something terrible has happened, to know that there is much in this world sadder far than death.’

‘I ask you once more,’ said Bradley in a broken voice, ‘where are you taking me?’

‘To those who can set your mind at rest, once and for ever.’

‘Who are they?’

‘The Farnesiani sisters,’ returned the Abbé.

Bradley sank back on his seat stupefied, with a sickening sense of horror.

The mental strain and agony were growing almost too much for him to bear. Into that brief day he had concentrated the torture of a lifetime; and never before had he known with what utterness of despairing passion he loved the woman whom he indeed held to be, in the sight of God, his wife. With frenzied self-reproach he blamed himself for all that had taken place. Had he never consented to an ignoble deception, never gone through the

mockery of a marriage ceremony with Alma, they might still have been at peace together ; legally separated for the time being, but spiritually joined for ever ; pure and sacred for each other, and for all the world. But *now*—now it seemed that he had lost her, body and soul !

The carriage presently halted, and Bradley saw at a glance that they were at the corner of the *cul-de-sac* leading to the convent. They alighted, and the Abbé paid the driver. A couple of minutes later they were standing on the platform above the walls of the houses.

All around them the bright sunshine burnt golden over the quivering roofs of Rome, and the sleepy hum of the Eternal City rolled up to them like the murmur of a summer sea.

There they stood like two black spots on

the ærial brightness; and again Bradley fell into one of those waking trances which he had of late so frequently experienced, and which he had frequently compared, in his calmer moments, to the weird seizures of the young Prince, ‘blue-eyed and fair of face,’ in the ‘Princess.’

He moved, looked, spoke as usual, showing no outward indication of his condition; but a mist was upon his mind, and nothing was real; he seemed rather a disembodied spirit than a man; the Abbé’s voice strange and far off, though clear and distinct as a bell; and when the Abbé rapped on the barrel, as he himself had done so recently, the voice that answered the summons sounded like a voice from the very grave itself.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE NAMELESS GRAVE.

The all-beholding sun shall see no more
In all his course ; nor yet in the cold ground
Where thy pale form was laid with many tears,
Nor in the embrace of Ocean shall exist
Thy image. Earth, that nourished thee, shall claim
Thy growth, to be resolved to earth again ;
And, lost each human trace, surrend'ring up
Thine individual being, shalt thou go
To mix for ever with the elements,
To be a brother to th' insensible rock
And to the sluggish clod.—*Thanatopsis*.

It seemed a dream still, but a horrible sunless dream, all that followed ; and in after years Ambrose Bradley never remembered it without a thrill of horror, finding it ever impossible to disentangle the reality from illusion, or to

separate the darkness of the visible experience from that of his own mental condition. But this, as far as he could piece the ideas together, was what he remembered.

Accompanied by the mysterious Abbé, he seemed to descend into the bowels of the earth, and to follow the figure of a veiled and sibylline figure who held a lamp. Passing through dark subterranean passages, he came to a low corridor, the walls and ceiling of which were of solid stone, and at the further end of which was a door containing an iron grating.

The priest approached the door, and said something in a low voice to some one beyond.

There was a pause; then the door revolved on its hinges, and they entered,—to find themselves in a black and vault-like

chamber, the darkness of which was literally 'made visible' by one thin, spectral stream of light, trickling through an orifice in the arched ceiling.

Here they found themselves in the presence of a tall figure stoled in black, which the Abbé saluted with profound reverence. It was to all intents and purposes the figure of a woman, but the voice which responded to the priest's salutation in Italian was deep—almost—as that of a man.

‘What is your errand, brother?’ demanded the woman after the first formal greeting was over. As she spoke she turned her eyes on Bradley, and they shone bright and piercing through her veil.

‘I come direct from the Holy Office,’ answered the Abbé, ‘and am deputed to in-

quire of you concerning one who was until recently an inmate of this sacred place,—a poor suffering Sister, who came here to find peace, consolation, and blessed rest. This English signor, who accompanies me, is deeply interested in her of whom I speak, and the Holy Office permits that you should tell him all you know.

The woman again gazed fixedly at Bradley as she replied—

‘She who enters here as an inmate leaves behind her at the gate her past life, her worldly goods, her kith and kin, her very name. Death itself could not strip her more bare of all that she has been. She becomes a ghost, a shadow, a cipher. How am I to follow the fate of one whose trace in the world has disappeared?’

‘You are trifling with me!’ cried Bradley.

‘Tell me at once, is she or is she not an inmate of this living hell?’

‘Do not blaspheme!’ cried the Abbé in English, while the veiled woman crossed herself with a shudder. ‘It is only in compassion for your great anguish of mind that our blessed Sister will help you, and such words as you are too prone to use will not serve your cause. Sister,’ he continued in Italian, addressing the woman, ‘the English signor would not willingly offend, though he has spoken wildly, out of the depth of his trouble. Now listen! It is on the record of the Holy Office that on a certain day some few months ago an English lady, under sanction, entered these walls and voluntarily said farewell to the world for ever, choosing the blessed path of a divine death-in-life to the sins and sorrows of an existence which was

surely life-in-death. The name she once bore, and the date on which she entered the convent, are written down on this paper. Please read them, and then perhaps you will be able to guide us in our search.'

So saying, the Abbé handed to the woman a folded piece of paper. She took it quietly, and, stepping slowly to the part of the chamber which was lit by the beam of chilly sunshine, opened the paper and appeared to read the writing upon it. As she did so, the dim and doubtful radiance fell upon her, and showed through the black but semi-transparent veil the dim outline of a livid human face.

Leaving the chamber, she approached a large vaulted archway at its inner end, and beckoned to the two men. Without a word they followed.

Still full of the wild sense of unreality, like a man walking or groping his way in a land of ghosts, Bradley walked on. Passing along a dismal stone corridor, where, at every step he took,

He dragged
Foot-echoes after him!

past passage after passage of vaulted stone, dimly conscious as he went of low doors opening into the gloomiest of cells, he hurried in the wake of his veiled guide. Was it only his distempered fancy, or did he indeed hear, from time to time, the sound of low wailings and dreary ululations proceeding from the darkness on every side of him? Once, as they crossed an open space dimly lit by dreary shafts of daylight, he saw a figure in sable weeds, on hands and knees, with her lips

pressed close against the stone pavement ; but at a word from his guide the figure rose with a feeble moan and fluttered away down a corridor into the surrounding darkness.

At last they seemed to pass from darkness into partial sunshine, and Bradley found himself standing in the open air. On every side, and high as the eye could reach, rose gloomy walls with overhanging caves and buttresses, leaving only one narrow space above where the blue of heaven was dimly seen. There was a flutter of wings, and the shadows of a flight of birds passed overhead—doves which made their home in the gloomy recesses of the roofs and walls.

Beneath was a sort of quadrangle, some twenty feet square, covered with grass, which for the most part grew knee-deep, interspersed

with nettles and gloomy weeds, and which was in other places stunted and decayed, as if withered by some hideous mildew or blight. Here and there there was a rude wooden cross stuck into the earth, and indicating what looked to the eye like a neglected grave.

The Sister led the way through the long undergrowth, till she reached the side of a mound on which the grass had scarcely grown at all, and on which was set one of those coarse crosses.

‘ You ask me what has become of the poor penitent you seek. She died in the holy faith, and her mortal body is buried *here*.’

With a wild shriek Bradley fell on his knees, and tearing the cross from the earth read the inscription rudely carved upon it :—

‘ SISTER ALMA.

Obiit 18—.’

That was all. Bradley gazed at the cross in utter agony and desolation ; then shrieking again aloud, fell forward on his face. The faint light from the far-off blue crept down over him, and over the two black figures, who gazed in wonder upon him ; and thus for a long time he lost the sense of life and time, and lay as if dead.

CHAPTER XXX.

IN PARIS.

Lay a garland on my hearse,
Of the dismal yew ;
Maidens, willow gardens bear ;
Say I dièd true.

My love was false, but I was firm
From my hour of birth ;
Upon my buried body lie
Lightly, gentle earth.—*The Maid's Tragedy.*

PROFESSOR MAPLELEAFE speedily saw that to oppose his sister would be inopportune—might perhaps even cause her decline and death. He determined therefore to humour her, and to delay for a short time their proposed return to America.

‘Look here, Eustasia,’ he said to her one day, ‘I find I’ve got something to do in Paris; you shall come with me. Perhaps the change there may bring you back to your old self again. Anyhow we’ll try it; for if this goes on much longer you’ll die!’

‘No, Salem, I shan’t die till I’ve seen *him* again!’ she answered, with a faint forced smile.

They set about making their preparations at once, and were soon on their way to Paris. The movement and change had given colour to Eustasia’s cheeks, and brought a pleasurable light of excitement into her eyes, so that already her brother’s spirits were raised.

‘She’ll forget him,’ he said to himself, ‘and we’ll be what we were before he came!’

But in this Salem was mistaken. Eustasia

was not likely to forget Bradley. Indeed, it was the thought of seeing him again that seemed to give new life to her rapidly wasting frame. She knew that he had left England ; she thought that, like herself, he might be travelling to get rid of his own distracting thoughts ; so wherever she went she looked about her to try and catch a glimpse of his face.

They fixed themselves in Paris, and Salem soon dropped into the old life. He fell amongst some kindred spirits, and the *séances* began again ; Eustasia taking part in them to please her brother, but no more. She was utterly changed ; each day as it rolled away seemed to take with it a part of her life, until her wasted frame became almost as etherealised as those of the spirits with whom she had dealt so much.

With constant nursing and brooding upon, her fascination for the Englishman increased ; it seemed, indeed, to be the one thing which kept her thin thread of life from finally breaking.

‘ If I could see him again,’ she murmured to herself, ‘ only once again, and then (as Salem says) die ! ’

The wish of her heart was destined to be realised : she did at least see Bradley once again.

She was sitting at home one day alone, when the door of the room opened, and more like a spectre than a man he walked in.

At the first glimpse of his face Eustasia uttered a wild cry and staggered a few steps forward, as if about to throw herself into his arms ; but suddenly she controlled herself, and sank half swooning into a chair.

‘ You have come ! ’ she said at length, raising her eyes wistfully to his ; ‘ you have come at last ! ’

He did not answer, but kept his eyes fixed upon hers with a look which made her shudder.

‘ How—how did you find me ? ’ she asked faintly.

‘ I came to Paris, and by accident I heard of you,’ he answered in a hollow voice.

Again there was silence. Bradley kept his eyes fixed upon the sibyl with a look which thrilled her to the soul. There was something about him which she could not understand ; something which made her fear him. Looking at him more closely, she saw that he was curiously changed ; his eyes were sunken and hollow ; and though they were fixed upon her they seemed to be looking at something far

away; his hair, too, had turned quite grey.

She rose from her seat, approached him, and gently laid her hand upon his arm.

‘Mr. Bradley,’ she said, ‘what is it?’

He passed his hand across his brow as if to dispel a dream, and looked at her curiously.

‘Eustasia,’ he said, using for the first time her Christian name, ‘speak the truth to me to-day; tell me, is all this real?’

‘Is what real?’ she asked, trembling. His presence made her faint, and the sound of her name, as he had spoken it, rang continually in her ears.

‘Is it not all a lie? Tell me that what you have done once you can do again; that you can bring me once more into the presence of the spirit of her I love!’

‘Of her you love?’ said the girl, fixing her large eyes wistfully upon his face. ‘What—what do you want me to do?’

‘Prove that it is not all a lie and a cheat : if you are a true woman, as I trust, I want you to bring back to me the spirit of my darling who is dead!’

She shrank for a moment from him, a sickening feeling of despair clouding all her senses ; then she bowed her head.

‘When will you come?’ she said.

‘To-night.’

Eustasia sank into her chair, and, without another word, Bradley departed.

At seven o’clock that night Bradley returned, and found the sibyl waiting for him.

She was quite alone. Since the morning her manner had completely changed ; her

hands were trembling, her cheek was flushed, but there was a look of strange determination about her lips and in her eyes. Bradley shook hands with her, then looked around as if expecting others.

She smiled curiously.

‘We are to be alone!’ she said—‘quite alone. I thought it better for you!’

For some time she made no attempt to move; at length, noticing Bradley’s impatience, she said quietly—

‘We will begin.’

She rose and placed herself opposite Bradley, and fixed her eyes intently upon him. Then, at her request, he turned down the gas; they were in almost total darkness touching hands.

For some time after Bradley sat in a

strange dream, scarcely conscious of anything that was taking place, and touching the outstretched hands of Eustasia with his own.

Suddenly a soft voice close to his ear murmured,—

‘Ambrose, my love!’

He started from his chair, and gazed wildly about him. He could see nothing, but he could feel something stirring close to him. Then he staggered back like a drunken man, and fell back in his chair.

‘Alma!’ he cried piteously, still conscious of the medium’s trembling hands, ‘Alma, my darling, come to me!’

For a moment there was silence, and Bradley could hear the beating of his heart. Then he became conscious of a soft hand upon his head; of lips that seemed to him like

warm human lips pressed against his forehead.

Gasping and trembling he cried—

‘Alma, speak ; is it *you*?’

The same soft voice answered him—

‘Yes, it is I!’

The hand passed again softly over his head and around his neck, and a pair of lips rich and warm were pressed passionately against his own. Half mad with excitement, Bradley threw one arm around the figure he felt to be near him, sprang to his feet while it struggled to disengage itself, turned up the light, and gazed full into the eyes of—Eustasia Maple-leaf.

Never till his dying day did Bradley forget the expression of the face which the sibyl now

turned towards his own, while, half crouching, half struggling, she tried to free herself from the grip of his powerful arms; for though the cheeks were pale as death, the eyes wildly dilated, they expressed no terror—rather a mad and reckless desperation. The mask had quite fallen; any attempt at further disguise would have been sheer waste of force and time, and Eustasia stood revealed once and for all as a cunning and dangerous trickster, a serpent of miserable deceit.

Yet she did not quail. She looked at the man boldly, and presently, seeing he continued to regard her steadfastly, as if lost in horrified wonder, she gave vent to her characteristic, scarcely audible, crooning laugh.

A thrill of horror went through him, as if he were under the spell of something diabolic.

For a moment he felt impelled to seize her by the throat and strangle her, or to savagely dash her to the ground. Conquering the impulse, he held her still as in a vice, until at last he found a voice—

‘Then you have lied to me? It has all been a lie from the beginning?’

‘Let me go,’ she panted, ‘and I will answer you!’

‘Answer me *now*,’ he said between his set teeth.

But the sibyl was not made of the sort of stuff to be conquered by intimidation. A fierce look came into her wonderful eyes, and her lips were closely compressed together.

‘Speak—or I may kill you!’ he cried.

‘Kill me, then!’ she answered. ‘Guess I don’t care!’

There was something in the wild face which mastered him in spite of himself. His hands relaxed, his arms sank useless at his side, and he uttered a deep despairing groan. Simultaneously she sprang to her feet, and stood looking down at him.

‘Why did you break the conditions?’ she asked in a low voice. ‘The spirits won’t be trifled with in that way, and they’ll never forgive you, or me; never.’

He made no sign that he heard her, but stood moveless, his head sunk between his shoulders, his eyes fixed upon the ground. Struck by the sudden change in him, she moved towards him, and was about to touch him on the shoulder, when he rose, still white as death, and faced her once more.

‘Do not touch me!’ he cried. ‘Do not

touch me, and do not, if you have a vestige of goodness left within you, try to torture me again. But look me in the face, and answer me, if you can, truly, remembering it is the last time we shall ever meet. When you have told me the truth, I shall leave this place, never to return ; shall leave *you*, never to look upon your face again. Tell me the truth, woman, and I will try to forgive you ; it will be very hard, but I will try. I know I have been your dupe from the beginning, and that what I have seen and heard has been only a treacherous mirage called up by an adventuress and her accomplices. Is it not so ? Speak ! Let me have the truth from your own lips.'

'I can't tell,' answered Eustasia coldly. 'If you mean that my brother and I have conspired to deceive you, it is a falsehood.'

We are simply agents in the hands of higher agencies than ours.'

'Once more, cease that jargon,' cried Bradley; 'the time has long past for its use. Will you confess, before we part for ever? You will not? Then good-bye, and God forgive you.'

So saying he moved towards the door; but with a sharp, bird-like cry she called him back.

'Stay! you must not go!'

He turned again towards her.

'Then will you be honest with me? It is the last and only thing I shall ask of you.'

'I—I will try,' she answered in a broken voice.

'You will!'

'Yes; if you will listen to me patiently.'

She sank into a chair, and covered her face with her hands. He stood watching her, and saw that her thin, white, trembling fingers were wet with tears.

‘Promise,’ she said, ‘that what I am about to say to you shall never be told to any other living soul.’

‘I promise.’

‘Not even to my brother.’

‘Not even to *him*.’

There was a long pause, during which he waited impatiently for her to continue. At last, conquering her agitation, she uncovered her face, and motioned to a chair opposite to her; he obeyed her almost mechanically, and sat down. She looked long and wistfully at him, and sighed several times as if in pain.

‘Salem says I shan’t live long,’ she mur-

mured thoughtfully. ‘To-night, more than ever, I felt like dying.’

She paused and waited as if expecting him to speak, but he was silent.

‘Guess *you* don’t care if I live or die?’ she added piteously, more like a sick child than a grown woman—and waited again.

‘I think I do care,’ he answered sadly, ‘for in spite of all the anguish you have caused me, I am sorry for you. But I am not myself, not the man you once knew. All my soul is set upon one quest, and I care for nothing more in all the world. I used to believe there was a God; that there was a life after death; that if those who loved each other parted here, they might meet again elsewhere. In my despair and doubt, I thought that you could give me assurance and heavenly hope; and I

clutched at the shadows you summoned up before me. I know now how unreal they were; I know now that you were playing tricks upon my miserable soul.'

She listened to him, and when he ceased began to cry again.

'I never meant any harm to *you*,' she sobbed! 'I—I loved you too well.'

'You loved me!' he echoed in amaze.

She nodded quickly, glancing at him with her keen wild eyes.

'Yes, Mr. Bradley. When Salem first took me to hear you preach, you seemed like the spirit of a man I once loved, and who once loved me. He's dead now, he is; died over there in the States, years ago. Well, afterwards, when I saw you again, I began to make believe to myself that you were that very man,

and that he was living again in you. You think me crazy, don't you? Ah well, you'll think me crazier when you hear all the rest. I soon found out all about you ; it wasn't very hard, and our people have ways of learning things you'd never guess. I didn't look far till I found out your secret ; that you loved another woman, I mean. That made me care for you all the more.'

Her manner now was quite simple and matter-of-fact. Her face was quite tearless, and, with hands folded in her lap, she sat quietly looking into his face. He listened in sheer stupefaction. Until that moment no suspicion of the truth had ever flashed upon his mind. As Eustasia spoke, her features seemed to become elfin-like and old, with a set expression of dreary and incurable pain ;

but she made her avowal without the slightest indication of shame or self-reproach, though her manner, from time to time, was that of one pleading for sympathy and pity.

She continued—

‘You don’t understand me yet, and I guess you never will. I’m not a European, and I haven’t been brought up like other girls. I don’t seem ever to have been quite young. I grew friends with the spirits when I wasn’t old enough to understand, and they seem to have stolen my right heart away, and put another in its place.’

‘Why do you speak of such things as if they were real? You know the whole thing is a trick and a lie.’

‘No, I don’t,’ she answered quickly. ‘I’m not denying that I’ve played tricks with *them*,

just as they've played tricks with *me*; but they're downright real—they are indeed. First mother used to come to me, when I was very little; then others, and in after-days I saw *him*; yes, after he was dead. Then sometimes, when they wouldn't come, Salem helped out the manifestations, that's all.'

'For God's sake, be honest with me!' cried Bradley. 'Confess that all these things are simple imposture. That photograph of yourself, for example—do you remember?—the picture your brother left in my room, and which faded away when I breathed upon it?'

She nodded her head again, and laughed strangely.

'It was a man out West that taught Salem how to do that,' she replied naïvely.

'Then it was a trick, as I suspected?'

‘Yes, I guess that was a trick. It was something they used in fixing the likeness, which made it grow invisible after it had been a certain time in contact with the atmospheric air.’

Bradley uttered an impatient exclamation.

‘And all the rest was of a piece with that ! Well, I could have forgiven you everything but having personified one who is now lost to me for ever.’

‘I never did. I suppose you *wished* to see her, and she came to you out of the spirit-land.’

‘*Now* you are lying to me again.’

‘Don’t you think I’m lying,’ was the answer ; ‘for its gospel-truth I’m telling you. I’m not so bad as you think me, not half so bad.’

Again shrinking from her, he looked at her with anger and loathing.

‘The device was exposed to-day,’ he said sternly. ‘You spoke to me with her voice, and when I turned up the light I found that I was holding in my arms no spirit, but yourself.’

‘Well, I’m not denying that’s true,’ she answered with another laugh. ‘Something came over me—I don’t know how it happened—and then, all at once, I was kissing you, and I had broken the conditions.’

By this time Bradley’s brain had cleared, and he was better able to grasp the horrible reality of the situation. It was quite clear to him that the sibyl was either an utter impostor, or a person whose mental faculties were darkened by fitful clouds of insanity. What

startled and horrified him most of all was the utter want of maidenly shame, the curious and weird sang-froid, with which she made her extraordinary confession. Her frankness, so far as it went, was something terrible—or, as the Scotch express it, ‘uncanny.’ Across his recollection, as he looked and listened, came the thought of one of these mysterious sibyls, familiar to mediæval superstition, who come into the world with all the outward form and beauty of women, but without a Soul, but who might gain a spiritual existence in some mysterious way by absorbing the souls of men. The idea was a ghastly one, in harmony with his distempered fancy, and he could not shake it away.

‘Tell me,’ said Eustasia gently, ‘tell me one thing, now I have told you so much. Is

that poor lady dead indeed—I mean the lady you used to love?’

The question went into his heart like a knife, and with livid face he rose to his feet.

‘Do not speak of her!’ he cried. ‘I cannot bear it—it is blasphemy! Miserable woman, do you think that you will ever be forgiven for tampering, as you have done, with the terrible truth of death? I came to you in the last despairing hope that among all the phantoms you have conjured up before me there might be some reality; for I was blind and mad, and scarcely knew what I did. If it is any satisfaction to you, know that you have turned the world into a tomb for me, and destroyed my last faint ray of faith in a living God. In my misery, I clung to the thought of your spirit world; and I came to you for

some fresh assurance that such a world might be. All that is over now. It is a cheat and a fraud like all the rest.'

With these words he left her, passing quickly from the room. Directly afterwards she heard the street door close behind him. Tottering to the window, she looked down in the street, and saw him stalk rapidly by, his white face set hard as granite, his eyes looking steadily before him, fixed on vacancy. As he disappeared, she uttered a low cry of pain, and placed her hand upon her heart.

CHAPTER XXXI.

AMONG THE MOUNTAINS.

Give me thy hand, terrestrial; so! Give me thy hand, celestial; so!—*Merry Wives of Windsor*.

It was the close of a bright sunshiny day in the spring of 18—. The sun was setting crimson on the lonely peak of the Zugspitz in the heart of the Bavarian Highlands, and the shadows of the pine woods which fringed the melancholy gorges beneath were lengthening towards the valleys.

Through one of these mountain gorges, following a rocky footpath, a man was rapidly

walking. He was roughly, almost rudely, dressed in a sort of tourist suit. On his head he wore a broadbrimmed felt hat of the shape frequently worn by clergymen, and in his hand he carried a staff like a shepherd's crook.

Scarcely looking to left or right, but hastening with impatient paces he hurried onward, less like a man hastening to some eagerly-sought shelter, than like one flying from some hated thing behind his back. His cheeks were pale and sunken, his eyes wild and sad. From time to time he slackened his speed, and looked wearily around him—up to the desolate sunlit peaks, down the darkening valley with its green pastures, belts of woodland, and fields of growing corn.

But whichever way he looked, he seemed

to find no joy in the prospect, indeed hardly to behold the thing he looked on, but to gaze through it and beyond it on some sorrowful portent.

Sometimes where the path became unusually steep and dangerous, he sprang from rock to rock with reckless haste, or when its thread was broken, as frequently happened by some brawling mountain stream, he entered the torrent without hesitation, and passed recklessly across. Indeed, the man seemed utterly indifferent to physical conditions, but labouring rather under some spiritual possession, completely and literally realising in his person the words of the poet :

His own mind did like a tempest strong
Come to him thus, and drave the weary wight along.

The wild scene was in complete harmony

with his condition. It was still and desolate, no sound seeming to break its solemn silence ; but pausing and listening intently, one would in reality have become conscious of many sounds—the deep under-murmur of the mountain streams, the ‘sough’ of the wind in the pine woods, the faint tinkling of goat-bells from the distant valleys, the solitary cry of rock doves from the mountain caves.

The man was Ambrose Bradley.

Nearly a year had elapsed since his sad experience in Rome. Since that time he had wandered hither and thither like another Ahasuerus ; wishing for death, yet unable to die ; burthened with the terrible weight of his own sin and self-reproach, and finding no resting-place in all the world.

Long before, as the reader well knows, the

man's faith in the supernatural had faded. He had refined away his creed till it had wasted away of its own inanition, and when the hour of trial came and he could have called upon it for consolation, he was horrified to find that it was a corpse, instead of a living thing. Then, in his horror and despair, he had clutched at the straw of spiritualism, only to sink lower and lower in the bitter waters of Marah. He found no hope for his soul, no foothold for his feet. He had, to use his own expression, lost the world.

It was now close upon night-time, and every moment the gorges along which he was passing grew darker and darker.

Through the red smokes of sunset one lustrous star was just becoming visible on the extremest peak of the mountain chain. But

instead of walking faster, Bradley began to linger, and presently, coming to a gloomy chasm which seemed to make further progress dangerous, impossible, he halted and looked down. The trunk of an uprooted pine-tree lay close to the chasm's brink. After looking quietly round him, he sat down, pulled out a common wooden pipe, and began to smoke.

Presently he pulled out a letter bearing the Munich post-mark, and with a face as dark as night began to look it through. It was dated from London, and ran as follows :

‘ Reform Club, *March 5*, 18—.

‘ My dear Bradley,—Your brief note duly reached me, and I have duly carried out your wishes with regard to the affairs of the new church. I have also seen Sir George Craik, and found him more amenable to reason than

I expected. Though he still regards you with the intensest animosity, he has sense enough to perceive that you are not directly responsible for the unhappy affair at Rome. His thoughts seem now chiefly bent on recovering his niece's property from the clutches of the Italian Jesuits, and in exposing the method by which they acquired such dominion over the unhappy lady's mind.

‘But I will not speak of this further at present, knowing the anguish it must bring you. I will turn rather to the mere abstract matter of your letter, and frankly open my mind to you on the subject.

‘What you say is very brief, but, from the manner in which it recurs in your correspondence, I am sure it represents the absorbing topic of your thoughts. Summed up in a few

words, it affirms your conclusion that all human effort is impossible to a man in your position, where the belief in personal immortality is gone.

‘ Now I need not go over the old ground, with which you are quite as familiar as myself. I will not remind you of the folly and the selfishness (from one point of view) of formulating a moral creed out of what, in reality, is merely the hereditary instinct of self-preservation. I will not repeat to you that it is nobler, after all, to live impersonally in the beautiful future of Humanity than to exist personally in a heaven of introspective dreams. But I should like, if you will permit me, to point out that this Death, this cessation of consciousness, which you dread so much, is not in itself an unmixed evil. True, just at present, in the

sharpness of your bereavement, you see nothing but the shadow, and would eagerly follow into its oblivion the shape of her you mourn. But as every day passes, this desire to die will grow less keen; and ten years hence, perhaps, or twenty years, you will look back upon to-day's anguish with a calm, sweet sense of spiritual gain, and with a peaceful sense of the sufficiency of life. Then, perhaps, embracing a creed akin to ours, and having reached a period when the physical frame begins slowly, and without pain, to melt away, you will be quite content to accept—what shall I say?—Nirwâna.

‘What I mean, my dear friend, is this, simply: that Death is only evil when it comes painfully or prematurely; coming in the natural order of things, in the inevitable decay

of Nature, it is by no means evil. And so much is this the case that, if you were to discover the consensus of opinion among the old, who are on the threshold of the grave, you would find the majority quite content that life should end for ever. Tired out with eighty or a hundred years of living, they gladly welcome sleep. It is otherwise, of course, with the victims of accidental disease or premature decay. But in the happy world to which we Positivists look forward, these victims would not exist.

‘Day by day Science, which you despise too much, is enlarging the area of human health. Think what has been done, even within the last decade, to abolish both physical and social disease ! Think what has yet to be done to make life freer, purer, safer, happier !

I grant you the millennium of the Grand Être is still far off; but it is most surely coming, and we can all aid, more or less, that blessed consummation—not by idle wailing, by useless dreams, or by selfish striving after an impossible personal reward, but by duty punctually performed, by self-sacrifice cheerfully undergone, by daily and nightly endeavours to ameliorate the condition of Man.

‘Men perish; Man is imperishable. Personal forms change; the great living personality abides. And the time must come at last when Man shall be as God, certain of his destiny, and knowing good and evil.

“A Job’s comforter!” I seem to hear you cry. Well, after all, you must be your own physician.

No man can save another’s soul,
Or pay another’s debt!

But I wish that you, in your distracted wandering after certainty, would turn your thoughts *our* way, and try to understand what the great Founder of our system has done, and will do, for the human race. I am sure that the study would bring you comfort, late or soon.

‘ I am, as ever, my dear Bradley,

‘ Your friend and well-wisher,

‘ JOHN CHOLMONDELEY.

‘ P.S.—What are you doing in Munich? I hear of curious doings this year at Ober-Ammergau, where that ghastly business, the Passion Play, is once more in course of preparation.’

Bradley read this characteristic epistle with a gloomy frown, which changed before he had finished to a look of bitter contempt; and, as

he read, he seemed once more conscious of the babble of literary club-land, and the affected jargon of the new creeds of the future. Returning the letter to his pocket, he continued to smoke till it was almost too dark to see the wreaths of fume from his own pipe.

The night had completely fallen before he rose and proceeded on his way.

CHAPTER XXXII.

ANOTHER OLD LETTER.

Love ! if thy destined sacrifice am I,
 Come, slay thy victim, and prepare thy fires ;
 Plunged in thy depths of mercy let me die
 The death which every soul that lives desires.

Madame Guyon.

‘ I AM writing these lines in my bedroom in the house of the Widow Gran, in the village of Ober-Ammergau. They are the last you will receive from me for a long time ; perhaps the last I shall ever send you, for more and more, as each day advances, I feel that my business with the world is done.

‘ What brought me hither I know not. I

am sure it was with no direct intention of witnessing what so many deem a mere mum-mery or outrage on religion ; but after many wanderings hither and thither, I found myself in the neighbourhood, and whether instinctively or of set purpose, approaching this lonely place.

‘ As I have more than once told you, I have of late, ever since my past trouble, been subject to a kind of waking nightmare, in which all natural appearances have assumed a strange unreality, as of shapes seen in dreams ; and one characteristic of these seizures has been a curious sense within my own mind that, vivid as such appearances seemed, I should *remember* nothing of them on actually *awaking*. A wise physician would shake his head and murmur “ diseased cerebration ; ” nor would his diagnosis

of my condition be less gloomy, on learning that my physical powers remain unimpaired, and seem absolutely incapable of fatigue. I eat and drink little ; sleep less ; yet I have the strength of an athlete still, or so it seems.

‘I walked hither across the mountains, having no other shelter for several nights than the boughs of the pine-woods where I slept. The weather was far from warm, yet I felt no cold ; the paths were dangerous, yet no evil befell me. If I must speak the truth, I would gladly have perished—by cold, by accident, by any swift and sudden means.

‘But when a man thirsts and hungers for death, Death, in its dull perversity, generally spares him. More than once, among these dizzy precipices and black ravines, I thought of suicide ; one step would have done it, one

quick downward leap ; but I was spared that last degradation—indeed, I know not how.

‘ It was night time when I left the mountains, and came out upon the public road. The moon rose, pale and ghostly, dimly lighting my way.

‘ Full of my own miserable phantasy, I walked on for hours and descended at last to the outlying houses of a silent village, lying at the foot of a low chain of melancholy hills. All was still ; a thin white mist filled the air, floating upward from the valley, and forming thick vaporous clouds around the moon. Dimly I discerned the shadows of the houses, but in none of the windows was there any light.

‘ I stood hesitating, not knowing which way to direct my footsteps or at which cottage door

to knock and seek shelter, and never, at any moment of my recent experience, was the sense of phantasy and unreality so full upon me. While I was thus hesitating I suddenly became conscious of the sound of voices coming from a small cottage situated on the roadside, and hitherto scarcely discernible in the darkness. Without hesitation I approached the door and knocked.

‘Immediately the voices ceased, and the moment afterwards the door opened and a figure appeared on the threshold.

‘If the sense of unreality had been strong before it now became paramount, for the figure I beheld wore a white priestly robe quaintly embroidered with gold, and a golden head-dress or coronet upon his head. Nor was this all. The large apartment behind him—a kind

of kitchen, with rude benches around the ingle—was lit by several lamps, and within it were clustered a fantastic group of figures in white tunics, plumed head-dresses of Eastern device, and mantles of azure, crimson, and blue, which swept the ground.

“Who is there?” said the form on the threshold in a deep voice, and speaking German in a strong Bavarian patois.

‘I answered that I was an Englishman, and sought a night’s shelter.

“Come in!” said the man, and thus invited I crossed the threshold.

‘As the door closed behind me, I found myself in the large raftered chamber, surrounded on every side by curious faces. Scattered here and there about the room were rudely-carved figures, for the most part repre-

senting the Crucifixion, many of them unfinished, and on a table near the window was a set of carver's tools. Rudely coloured pictures, all of biblical subjects, were placed here and there upon the walls, and over the fireplace hung a large Christ in ebony, coarsely carven.

‘Courteously enough the fantastic group parted and made way for me, while one of the number, a woman, invited me to a seat beside the hearth.

‘I sat down like one in a dream, and accosted the man who had invited me to enter.

‘“What place is this?” I asked. “I have been walking all night and am doubtful where I am.”

‘“You are at Ober-Ammergau!” was the reply.

‘I could have laughed had my spirit been

less oppressed. For now, my brain clearing, I began to understand what had befallen me. I remembered the Passion Play and all that I had read concerning it. The fantastic figures I beheld were those of some of the actors still attired in the tinsel robes they wore upon the stage.

‘I asked if this was so, and was answered in the affirmative.

“‘We begin the play to-morrow,” said the man who had first spoken. “I am Johann Diener the *Chorführer*, and these are some of the members of our chorus. We are up late, you see, preparing for to-morrow, and trying on the new robes that have just been sent to us from Annheim. The pastor of the village was here till a few minutes ago, seeing all things justly ordered amongst us, and he would

gladly have welcomed you, for he loves the English."

'The man's speech was gentle, his manner kindly in the extreme, but I scarcely heeded him, although I knew now what the figures around me were—the merest supernumeraries and chorus-singers of a tawdry show. They seemed to me none the less ghostly and unreal, shadows acting in some grim farce of death.

'“Doubtless the gentleman is fatigued,” said a woman, addressing Johann Diener, “and would wish to go to rest.”

'I nodded wearily. Diener, however, seemed in some perplexity.

'“It is not so easy,” he returned, “to find the gentleman a shelter. As you all know, the village is overcrowded with strangers. How-

ever, if he will follow me, I will take him to Joseph Mair, and see what can be done."

'I thanked him, and without staying to alter his dress, he led the way to the door.

'We were soon out in the open street. Passing several *châlets*, Diener at last reached one standing a little way from the roadside, and knocked.

"Come in," cried a clear kind voice.

'He opened the door and I followed him into an interior much resembling the one we had just quitted, but smaller, and more full of tokens of the woodcutter's trade. The room was dimly lit by an oil lamp swinging from the ceiling. Seated close to the fireplace, with his back towards us, engaged in some nandy work, was a man.

'As we entered the man rose and stood

looking towards us. I started in wonder, and uttered an involuntary cry.

‘It was Jesus Christ, Jesus the son of Joseph, in his habit as he lived !

‘I had no time, and indeed I lacked the power, to separate the true from the false in this singular manifestation. I saw before me, scarce believing what I saw, the Christ of History, clad as the shape is clad in the famous fresco of Leonardo, but looking at me with a face mobile, gentle, beautiful, benign. At the same moment I perceived, scarcely understanding its significance, the very crown of thorns, of which so many a martyr since has dreamed. It was lying on the coarse table close to a number of wood-carving tools, and close to it was a plate of some red pigment, with which it had recently been stained.

‘Johann Diener advanced.

“I am glad to find you up, Joseph. This English gentleman seeks shelter for the night, and I scarcely knew whither to take him.”

“You will not find a bed in the place,” returned the other; and he continued addressing me. “Since this morning our little village has been overrun, and many strangers have to camp out in the open air. Never has Ober-Ammergau been so thronged.”

‘I scarcely listened to him; I was so lost in contemplation of the awful personality he represented.

“Who are you?” I asked, gazing at him in amaze.

‘He smiled, and glanced down at his dress.

“I am Joseph Mair,” he replied. “Tomorrow I play the Christus, and as you came

I was repairing some portion of the attire, which I have not worn for ten years past."

'Jesus of Nazareth! Joseph Mair! I understood all clearly now, but none the less did I tremble with a sickening sense of awe.

'That night I remained in the house of Joseph Mair, sitting on a bench in the ingle, half dying, half dreaming, till daylight came. Mair himself soon left me, after having set before me some simple refreshment, of which I did not care to partake. Alone in that chamber, I sat like a haunted man, almost credulous that I had seen the Christ indeed.

'*I have* seen him! I understand now all the piteous humble pageant! I have beheld the Master as He lived and died; not the

creature of a poet's dream, not the Divine Ideal I pictured in my blind and shadowy creed ; but Jesus who perished on Calvary, Jesus the Martyr of the World.

‘ All day long, from dawn to sunset, I sat in my place, watching the mysterious show. Words might faintly foreshadow to you what I beheld, but all words would fail to tell you what I felt ; for never before, till these simple children of the mountains pictured it before me, had I realised the full sadness and rapture of that celestial Life. How faint, miserable, and unprofitable seemed my former creed, seen in the light of the tremendous Reality foreshadowed on that stage, with the mountains closing behind it, the blue heaven bending tranquilly above it, the birds singing on the branches round about, the wind and sunshine shining

over it and bringing thither all the gentle motion of the world. Now for the first time I conceived that the Divine Story was not a poet's dream, but a simple tale of sooth, a living experience which even the lowliest could understand and before which the highest and wisest must reverently bow.

‘I seem to see your look of wonder, and hear your cry of pitying pain. Is the man mad? you ask. Is it possible that sorrow has so weakened his brain that he can be overcome by such a summer cloud as the *Passionspiel* of a few rude peasants—a piece of mummary only worthy of a smile! Well, so it is, or seems. I tell you this “poor show” has done for me what all intellectual and moral effort has failed to do—it has brought me face to face with the living God.

‘This at least I know, that there is no *via media* between the full acceptance of Christ’s miraculous life and death, and acquiescence in the stark materialism of the new creed of scientific experience, whose most potent word is the godless Nirwâna of Schopenhauer.

‘Man cannot live by the shadowy gods of men—by the poetic spectre of a Divine Ideal, by the Christ of Fancy and of Poesy, by the Jesus of the dilettante, by the Messiah of a fairy tale. Such gods may do for happy hours ; their ghostliness becomes apparent in times of spiritual despair and gloom.

‘“ Except a man be born again, he shall not enter the kingdom of Heaven !” I have heard these divine words from the lips of one who seemed the Lord himself ; nay, who perchance *was* that very Lord, putting on again the like-

ness of a poor peasant's humanity, and clothing himself with flesh as with a garment. I have seen and heard with a child's eyes, a child's ears ; and even as a child, I question no longer but believe.

‘*Mea culpa ! mea culpa !* In the light of that piteous martyrdom I review the great sin of my life ; but out of sin and its penalty has come transfiguration. I know now that my beloved one was taken from me in mercy, that I might follow in penitence and love. Patience, my darling, for I shall come ;—God grant that it may be soon !’

CONCLUSION.

THE following letter, written in the summer of 18—, by John Cholmondeley to Sir George Craik, contains all that remains to be told concerning the fate of Ambrose Bradley, sometime minister of Fensea, and a seceder from the Church of England :—

‘My dear Sir,—You will remember our conversation, when we last met in London, concerning that friend of mine with whose fortunes those of your lamented niece have been unhappily interwoven. Your language was then sufficiently bitter and unforgiving. Perhaps you will think more gently on the

subject when you hear the news I have now to convey to you. The Rev. Ambrose Bradley died a fortnight ago, at Ober-Ammergau, in the Bavarian highlands.

‘From time to time, during his wanderings in the course of the past year, we had been in correspondence; for, indeed, I was about the only friend in the world with whom he was on terms of close intimacy. Ever since the disappearance of Miss Craik his sufferings had been most acute; and my own impression is that his intellect was permanently weakened. But that, perhaps, is neither here nor there.

‘Some ten days ago, I received a communication from the village priest of Ober-Ammergau, informing me that an Englishman had died very suddenly and mysteriously in the village, and that the only clue to his

friends and connexions was a long letter found upon his person, addressed to me, at my residence in the Temple. I immediately hastened over to Germany, and found, as I had anticipated, that the corpse was that of my poor friend. It was lying ready for interment in the cottage of Joseph Mair, a wood-carver, and a leading actor in the Passion Play.

‘I found, on inquiry, that Mr. Bradley had been in the village for several weeks, lodging at Mair’s cottage, and dividing his time between constant attendance at the theatre, whenever the Passion Play was represented, and long pedestrian excursions among the mountains. He was strangely taciturn, indifferent to ordinary comforts, eating little or nothing, and scarcely sleeping. So at least the man Mair informed me, adding

that he was very gentle and harmless, and to all intents and purposes in perfect health.

‘ Last Sunday week he attended the theatre as usual. That night he did not return to the cottage of his host. Early next morning, Joseph Mair, on going down to the theatre with his tools, to do some carpenter’s work upon the stage, found the dead body of a man there, lying on his face, with his arms clasped around the mimic Cross ; and turning the dead face up to the morning light, he recognised my poor friend.

‘ That is all I have to tell you. His death, like his life, was a sad affair. I followed him to his grave in the little burial-place of Ober-Ammergau—where he rests in peace. I am, &c.,

‘ JOHN CHOLMONDELEY.

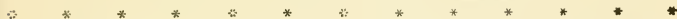
‘Judging from some talk I had before leaving with the village priest, a worthy old fellow who knew him well, I believe poor Bradley died in full belief of the Christian faith ; but as I have already hinted to you, his intellect, for a long time before his death, was greatly weakened. Take him for all in all, he was one of the best men I ever knew, and might have been happy but for the unfortunate “set” of his mind towards retrograde superstitions.’

THE END.



CHATTO & WINDUS'S

LIST OF BOOKS.



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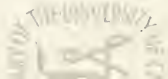
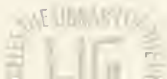
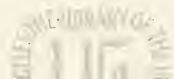
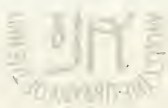


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